

TITHES, FESTIVALS AND ALMS

September 30, 2018
18th Sunday after Pentecost
Revision G

Epistle: 2 Corinthians 9:6-11

Today's Epistle reading is used in Western Churches the United States as the Epistle for the American holiday of Thanksgiving Day. Thanksgiving Day is not a Feast Day in the Orthodox Lectionary.

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Background: Old Testament Tithing

Under Mosaic Law, there were three types of tithes, often referred to by scholars today as the first, second and third tithe. The righteous Tobin described these three tithes in his almsgiving (Tobit 1:5-8 LXX). In the Old Testament, they are referred to as the tithe, festival offerings, and alms. Since the Mosaic Law was given to Moses in the wilderness, no central city had yet been established where one might bring one's tithes. Later this would be Jerusalem where the Temple was located. At the place that the Lord will choose (this is, Jerusalem, Deuteronomy 12:5-7) everyone was to gather and bring their:

- Burnt offerings
 - Sacrifices
 - Tithes
 - Alms or gifts
 - Vows or promises
 - Free will offerings
 - The firstborn of everything

Tithes:

The first tithe was used for the support of the Levites, who had no land for an inheritance (Numbers 18:20-24). The way this worked in an agricultural economy was that every 10th sheep (for example) coming into the sheepfold went to the Lord (Leviticus 27:30-33) and was received by the Levites. The Levites, in turn, contributed a tithe of what they received to the high priest, which was Aaron and his descendants (Numbers 18:26-28). Following their model, most Antiochian Orthodox churches contribute a tithe of all income to their Archbishop, in our case, Metropolitan JOSEPH.

Festivals:

The tithes and other vows, alms and freewill offerings were to be brought to Jerusalem three times per year at Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacles where everyone rejoiced before the Lord. The first tithe belonged to the Levites; the tithe used at the festivals was actually a second tithe, since everyone used it, not just the Levites (Deuteronomy 12:12-19).

Alms:

Every third year, an additional portion was set aside for the alien, the orphans, the widows and the Levites (Deuteronomy 14:28-29, 26:12-13). Josephus said¹ that this was a third tithe and it had been set up that way from the days of Moses. Following the giving of this third tithe, the people were to say “before the Lord” that they have not withheld any and to ask the Lord for a blessing that they might continue to have a land flowing with milk and honey (Deuteronomy 26:12-15). This third tithe was all that the widow of Nain could expect if the people were faithful to follow the Mosaic Law. Since Jesus criticized the Scribes and Pharisees for devouring widows’ houses (Matthew 23:14), the widow of Nain could probably expect nothing and was probably in dire straits with the death of her son.

The harvest of the land was dependent on the peoples’ observing the Lord’s statutes. For example, every seventh year, the land was to lie fallow with no planting or reaping (Leviticus 25:2-5). If the people observed the Lord’s statutes, the sixth year’s crops would be extensive enough to carry them for three years, or until the eighth-year-crop was in (Leviticus 25:18-22). The same was true with the tithe; the more they gave, the more they had.

The same applied to helping the poor. They were to freely open their hand to him and generously lend him sufficient for his needs (Deuteronomy 15:7-8). To not do so was a sin and the poor man may cry to the Lord against his rich neighbors. In being generous to him, however, “the Lord will bless them in all their work and in everything they do” (Deuteronomy 15:9-11).

The Firstborn:

The firstborn of both man and beast was devoted to the Lord (Exodus 13:2). The Lord intended the firstborn of man to be devoted to Him as priests. However, when all the people sinned by worshipping the golden calf, it was only the Levites who responded to Moses’ call to return to the Lord (Exodus 32:26). Therefore, the Lord dedicated the Levites instead of the firstborn to serve in the Tabernacle (Numbers 3:12-13). All the firstborn of non-Levites and all the firstborn of unclean animals were to be redeemed (Numbers 28:15-16). All firstborn of clean animals were to be offered as a sacrifice, where the priests received the meat of the animals after

¹ Flavius Josephus, Antiquities of the Jews, IV, viii, 22, 240.

it was offered (Numbers 18:17-19). The dedication of the firstborn was in addition to the tithes. At the time of Joshua, the Canaanites and the surrounding nations took this one step further and offered the firstborn of man as a human sacrifice. This was heresy and implied that man could redeem himself by himself.

Where Did Tithes Originate?

The practice of tithing was well established at the time of Abraham when Abraham (Abram) gave a tithe to Melchizedek (Hebrews 7:1-6). Two generations later Jacob made a vow or promise to give the Lord a tithe upon his safe return home (Genesis 28:20-22). Vows or votive offerings were well established then also.

Sacrifice had already been established before Cain killed Abel, and it was jealousy over the Lord's acceptance of Abel's offering that led Cain to kill Abel (Genesis 4:2-5). Had Cain and Abel been instructed to give tithes? The Lord taught them to make clothes out of animal skins (Genesis 3:21); yet people before the flood weren't meat-eaters (Genesis 9:2-4). The meat of the animals must have been used for sacrifices and the skin for clothing, just as the priests later received the skin of the animal that they helped to sacrifice (Leviticus 7:8).

New Testament Tithe:

One might contend that tithing is Old Testament Law and is not applicable to life in the New Testament. But in a discussion with the Scribes and Pharisees who paid a strict tithe of everything they received, Jesus criticized them for neglecting weightier matters of the Law (justice, mercy and faith). He said, "These you ought to have done without leaving the others (i.e. tithing) undone" (Matthew 23:23).

Under the Old Testament Law, the Prophet Malachi spoke to the people of his day about robbing God by refusing to contribute their tithes: "But you say, 'How have we robbed Thee?' In tithes and offerings! You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing Me, the whole nation of you. Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in My house. Test Me now in this, says the Lord of Hosts, if I will not open for you the windows of heaven and pour out for you a blessing until it overflows" (Malachi 3:8-10: compare Deuteronomy 26:12-15).

In the Early Church, people gave not just a Tithe, but they sold everything they had and laid the proceeds at the Apostles' feet for the Apostles to do as they pleased (Acts 2:45, 4:36-37). This demonstrates a singular detachment from worldly possessions among members of the Early Church.

New Testament Alms:

The Apostle Paul was involved in bringing alms to the Church in Jerusalem on at least two occasions. One occurred during a famine in 45 AD where Paul and Barnabas brought relief from Antioch to the churches in Judea (Acts 11:27-30).

On another occasion in 57 AD at the end of Paul's 3rd Missionary Journey, Paul collected alms from the Churches in Achaia (Corinth and Athens), Macedonia, (Berea, Thessalonica, Philippi) and Galatia (Iconium, Lystra, Derbe) to bring to Jerusalem (Acts 24:17). Paul felt it was the duty of the Gentile churches to help out materially since they benefited spiritually from

Jerusalem (Romans 15:25-27). The collection of these alms was systematic and well planned (1 Corinthians 16:1-4). Even though the churches in Macedonia were mired in deep poverty, they still managed to give alms well beyond their ability (2 Corinthians 8:1-4).

Paul's References to Tithing: 2 Corinthians 9:6-11

Today's Epistle reading contains two Old Testament references: Psalm 112:9 and Isaiah 55:10. Psalm 112 begins with "How Blessed is the man who fears the Lord, who greatly delights in His commandments" (Psalm 112:1). This man has descendants who are mighty (Psalm 112:2), has wealth in his house (Psalm 112:3) and does not fear evil tidings (Psalm 112:7). He is light arising in the darkness (Psalm 112:4); he is gracious and lends his money (Psalm 112:5); and he freely gives to the poor (Psalm 112:9, quoted in 2 Corinthians 9:9). The implication is that the reason he is strong and wealthy is because he gives and lends. That is, he is not attached to his worldly possessions, and there is a great deal of wisdom in this.

In Isaiah 55:10, the prophet spoke about how the Lord's ways and thoughts are higher than our ways and thoughts as much as the heavens are higher than the earth (Isaiah 55:8-12). In the context of the epistle lesson, the implication is that the Lord has the foresight to see the long-term fruit of one's generosity, very much like a crop that can be harvested. The imagery Isaiah used were rain and snow as compared to the Word of God. The rain and snow come down from heaven, water the earth and make it sprout with seed and thus bread before returning to heaven (as evaporation). So also the Word does not return empty without accomplishing what He desires and succeeding in that which He sent.

A Cheerful Giver

Paul used this reference to Isaiah in connection with giving alms and tithes. The seed that we sow, like rain and the Word of God, will return. If we sow sparingly, we will reap sparingly; if we sow bountifully, we will reap bountifully (2 Corinthians 9:6). There is an analogy here to the 6th year crop (Leviticus 25:18-22). The Lord will see to it that "all grace abounds toward us that we may have an abundance for every good work" (2 Corinthians 9:8), and that we "are enriched in everything for all liberality" (2 Corinthians 9:11).

However, God is not a tax collector; we are not forced to do this. In the Early Church, people were not forced to sell all that they had. God loves a cheerful giver, not one doing so "grudgingly or of necessity" (2 Corinthians 9:7). A cheerful giver is like the camel that passes through the eye of the needle easily because his pack or burden comes off easily (Matthew 19:22-26). To understand what this means, we need to understand how ancient cities were constructed

The main gates of most cities in ancient times were huge wooden structures set in an archway and often overlaid with brass for strength and flame proofing. At night, the gates were closed and locked with a bar on the inside and not opened until morning. Travelers that arrived late in the day after the gates were closed were forced to spend the night outside the city unless there was some provision for them to get into the city. Outside the city, law and order did not exist at night and travelers were at the mercy of outlaws. This is still the case today in some third world countries.

To deal with this situation, many ancient cities had a “needle’s eye gate” which was a small, low door beside the main gate. Such a feature existed on at least one of the gates of Jerusalem and Damascus². A man could fit easily through the “needle’s eye gate”, but a camel, being a large animal, could not fit easily. If the camel’s pack (which could weight up to 1,000 pounds) were removed and the camel were made to kneel, the camel could just barely crawl through the “needle’s eye gate.”

The statement Jesus made, that it is easier for a camel to go through the needle’s eye gate than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God, made use of the above imagery. Like the camel, the rich man first needs to unload his pack or burden. The parable of the sower refers to this pack as “the cares of this world, the deceit of riches, the desire for other things” (Mark 4:19) and the pleasures of life (Luke 8:14). These are things that appeal to our flesh and which can lead us away from God. Some of the early disciples, like Barnabas (one of the Seventy) sold a large amount of property and brought the entire proceeds to the Twelve (Acts 4:34-37). Ananias and Sapphira on the other hand, were caught in the deceit of riches and held back part of the proceeds – and paid dearly (Acts 5:1-10).

A cheerful giver, then, is one whose pack or burden comes off easily (Matthew 19:22-26). This aspect of the Christian life has been little understood in our generation in the West.

To be a cheerful giver takes faith. As John Chrysostom said³, “Many persons are afraid to give alms, saying, ‘In case I become poor; in case I need aid from others.’” To give when one expects a return is an investment; even tax collectors do that! To give without expecting a return is being god-like⁴. As Chrysostom said⁵,

“If one is doing work of virtue, and yet all that is done is of necessity, it is shorn of its reward; with reason also Paul labors at this point.”

John Chrysostom noted⁶ that when, “All that believed were together, and had all things in common” (Acts 2:44), this early Christian community was a collection of cheerful givers. The result was very beneficial not just to them but also to the community. They immediately obtained a reward, that is, the ‘hundredfold’ that Jesus spoke of (Mark 10:29-30), for having left everything for Christ’s sake. In this case, the reward was ‘the favor with all the people’ (Acts 2:47).

“They had become angels all of a sudden, all of them; continuing in prayer and hearing, they saw that spiritual things are common, no one there had more than another, and they speedily came together, to the same thing in common. This does not mean that they were together in one place, but that this was an angelic commonwealth, not to call anything of theirs their own. The root of evils was cut out; by what they did, they showed what they had heard. This was what he said, ‘Save yourselves from this perverse generation’ (Acts 2:40), and ‘daily

² G. Christian Weiss, Insight into Bible Times and Customs, Good News Broadcasting Association, Lincoln NE, 1972, pp. 24-25.

³ John Chrysostom, Homilies on 2 Corinthians, XIX, v. 8.

⁴ See also the Gospel Lesson for the 2nd Sunday of Luke.

⁵ John Chrysostom, Homilies on 2 Corinthians, XIX, v. 7.

⁶ John Chrysostom, Commentary on Acts, VII, v. 46.

continuing with one accord in the temple' (Acts 2:46). Daily they went up as to a sacred place, and frequently we find Peter and John doing this; for at present they disturbed none of the Jewish observances⁷. Observe the increase of piety; they abandoned their riches, rejoiced and had great gladness, for greater were the riches they received without labor. None reproached, none envied, none grudged; no pride, no contempt was there. As children they accounted themselves to be under teaching; as newborn babies, such was their disposition. No talk of 'mine' and 'yours' then. Gladness waited at their table; no one seemed to eat of his own, or of another's. The poor man knew no shame, the rich no haughtiness. This is gladness! The latter deemed himself the obliged and fortunate party; the others felt themselves as honored by this, and closely were they bound together. When people make lots of money, there are apt to be insults, pride, grudging; therefore Paul said, 'Not grudgingly, or of necessity' (2 Corinthians 9:7). See of how many things Paul bears witness to them! Genuine faith, upright conduct, perseverance in hearing, in prayers, in singleness, in cheerfulness! Two things there were which might deject them, their abstinent living, and the loss of their property⁸. Yet on both these accounts did they rejoice, and they 'had favor with all the people' (Acts 2:47). For everyone loves men of this character, as common fathers! They conceived no malice toward each other; they committed all to the grace of God. There was no fear even though they had taken their position in the midst of dangers. By singleness, he denotes their entire virtue, far surpassing their contempt of riches, their abstinence, and their perseverance in prayer. Thus they offered pure praise to God! Observe here how they immediately obtain their reward by 'having favor with all the people'! They were engaging, and highly beloved. Who would not prize and admire their simplicity of character; who would not be linked to one in whom was nothing underhanded?"

Removal of Our Sins

There is a greater benefit to giving alms than most people realize. In the giving of alms there is a working of relief from our sins. Christ had said, 'He that receives a prophet in the name of a prophet, shall receive a prophet's reward' (Matthew 10:41). John Chrysostom stated⁹ that there are similar rewards for giving alms; in doing so with the right motive, we receive relief from our sins. This takes some discernment, however, and it is not at all a case of purchasing indulgences by giving alms. If the Judge actually receives us into His eternal Kingdom for seeing Him hungry and feeding Him (Matthew 25:34-40), there must be a removal of our offenses involved in the proper giving of alms. However, we should not be overly curious about who it is that we give alms to and whether he is deserving of such. Imposters and con men can sometimes appear to be more deserving than Christ Himself.

"If one gives alms as if granting a favor to the receiver, it would be better for him not to give at all. For my concern is not that the saints may be supported.

⁷ This is interesting to note that their worship in the Temple did not bother the Jewish leaders, only their teaching about Jesus. This suggests that they used a liturgy similar to the Old Testament liturgy, and even participated in the on-going Temple liturgy.

⁸ See also Mark Kern, *The Life of the Evangelist Mark*, St Athanasius Press, 2005. The Evangelist Mark founded a number of monasteries in Alexandria in the late 40's AD, where the lifestyle of everything in common was patterned after the early Christian community in Jerusalem at Pentecost.

⁹ John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Philippians*, I, v. 7.

Even if you don't give, someone else will. What I want is that you may have a relief from your own sins. But he that gives as if it were a favor will have no relief. For it is not the giving of alms that is doing alms, but the doing it with readiness; it is the rejoicing, and the feeling grateful to him that receives. 'Not grudgingly', Paul said, 'or of necessity; for God loves a cheerful giver' (2 Corinthians 9:7). Except one give in this manner, let him not give at all; for that would be a loss, not a giving of alms. If you know that you (the giver) will gain, not they (the receivers), be assured that your gain becomes greater. The body of those receiving your alms is fed, but your soul is approved; for them, not one of their sins is forgiven when they receive, but for you, the greater part of your offenses is removed."

"Let us share with the poor in their great prizes. Adopt Christ in your almsgiving, and you shall have great security. If there is any of the rulers of the church that lives in abundance and needs nothing, though he is a saint, don't give to him, but prefer to him one that is in need, though he is not as admirable. Christ wills this, as when He said, 'If you make a dinner, don't call your friends, or your kinsmen, but call the maimed, the lame and the blind, that cannot recompense you' (Luke 14:12-14). One needs discernment in paying such attention to the poor, the hungry, the thirsty, those who need clothing, strangers, and those who from riches have been reduced to poverty. For He said not simply, 'I was fed', but 'I was hungry', for, 'You saw Me hungry and fed Me' (Matthew 25:35). There are two parts to the claim, both that he is a saint and that he is hungry. For if he that is simply hungry ought to be fed, much more when he is a saint that is hungry. If then he is a saint, but not in need, don't give; for there is no gain for you in this. And neither did Christ ask you to do it; or rather, he is not a saint if he is in abundance and allows himself to receive. Do you see that these things have been said to you for your profit? Feed the hungry, that you may not feed the fire of hell. The hungry man, eating what is yours, sanctifies also what remains" (Luke 11:41).

"Think how the widow maintained Elijah; she did not feed more than she was fed; she did not give more than she received. This also takes place in a much greater thing. For it is not a 'barrel of flour', or 'a jar of oil' (1 Kings 17:14); but 'a hundredfold and eternal life' (Matthew 19:21, 29) is the recompense for doing so. You become the mercy of God; the spiritual food; a pure leaven. She was a widow; famine was pressing, and nothing hindered her. She had children, and she still did not hold back (1 Kings 17:12). This woman has become equal to her that cast in the two mites (Luke 21:1-4). She didn't say to herself, 'What shall I receive from this man? He stands in need of me. If he had any power he would not be hungry; he would have broken the drought; he would not have been subject to this suffering. Perhaps he too offends God'. None of these things did she think of. Do you see how great a good it is to do well with simplicity, and not to be overly curious about the person who is benefited? If she had chosen to be curious she would have doubted; she would not have believed."

"Abraham also, if he had chosen to be curious, would not have received angels. For it cannot be, that one who is exceedingly nice in these matters, should ever meet with them. Such people usually invite impostors. The pious man does

not desire to appear pious, and does not clothe himself for show, and is likely to be rejected. But the impostor, as he makes a business of it, puts on a great deal of piety that is hard to see through. So that while he who does good, even to those who don't seem to be pious, will fall in with those who are pious; he who seeks out those who are thought to be pious, will often fall in with those who are not so. Therefore, I ask you; let us do all things in simplicity. Let us even suppose that he is an impostor that comes; you are not asked to be curious about this. 'Give to everyone that asks you' (Luke 6:30); and, 'Deliver them that are led away to death, and redeem them that are appointed to be slain; be sure to help' (Proverbs 24:11 LXX). Yet most of those that are slain suffer this for some evil they are convicted of; still he said, 'Deliver them'. For in this shall we be like God, thus shall we be admired, and shall obtain those immortal blessings, which we all wish to be thought worthy of."

John Chrysostom addressed¹⁰ widows in the Church and how they can help with hospitality. Be sure to do it yourself, like Abraham, not delegate it to a handmaid; otherwise you lose your reward. The stranger may feel bashful and unwilling to impose on us; we need to approach him as if we were receiving Christ, and as if we were receiving the honor of His Presence. In doing this for the poor stranger, the greater part of our sin is removed.

"The hospitality here spoken of is not merely a friendly reception, but one given with zeal, cheerfulness and readiness, going about it as if one were receiving Christ Himself. The widows should perform these services themselves, not commit them to their handmaids. For Christ said, 'If I your Master and Lord have washed your feet, you ought also to wash one another's feet' (John 13:14). And though a woman may be very rich, of the highest rank, of noble birth and family, there is not the same distance between her and others, as between God and the disciples. If you receive the stranger as Christ, don't be ashamed, but rather glory. But if you can't receive him as Christ, don't receive him at all. 'He that receives you', He said, 'receives Me' (Matthew 10:40). If you do not receive him in this way, you have no reward. Abraham was receiving men that passed as travelers, as he thought, and he did not leave it to his servants to make the preparations for their entertainment, but took the greater part of the service upon himself. He commanded his wife to mix the flour, though he had three hundred and eighteen servants born in his house (Genesis 18:6-7, 14:14), of whom there must have been many maidservants. But he wished that himself and his wife should have the reward, not of the cost only, but of the service. Thus we ought to exercise hospitality always by our own personal exertion that we may be sanctified, and our hands blessed. And if you give to the poor, don't hesitate to give it yourself, for it is not to the poor that it is given, but to Christ. Who is so wretched as to scornfully refuse to stretch out his own hand to Christ?"

"This is hospitality; this is truly to do it for God's sake. But if you give orders with pride, though you ask the stranger to take the first place, it is not hospitality; it is not done for God's sake. The stranger requires much attendance, much encouragement, and with all this it is difficult for him not to feel bashful; for so delicate is his position, that while he receives the favor, he is ashamed.

¹⁰ John Chrysostom, Homilies on 1 Timothy, XIV, vv. 9-10.

That shame we ought to remove by the most attentive service, and to show by words and actions, that we do not think we are conferring a favor, but receiving one. So much does good will multiply the kindness! He, who considers himself a loser, and thinks that he is doing a favor, destroys all the merit of it. So he, who looks upon himself as receiving a kindness, increases the reward. ‘For God loves a cheerful giver’ (2 Corinthians 9:7). You are rather indebted to the poor man for receiving your kindness. If there were no poor, the greater part of your sins would not be removed. The poor are the healers of your wounds; their hands are medicinal to you. The physician, extending his hand to apply a remedy, does not exercise the healing more than the poor man, who stretches out his hand to receive your alms, and thus becomes a cure for your ills. You give your money, and with it your sins pass away. Such were the Priests of old, of whom it was said, ‘They eat up the sin of My people’ (Hosea 4:8). Thus you receive more than you give; you are benefited more than you benefit. You lend to God, not to men. You increase your wealth, rather than diminish it.”

How Can We Obtain a Better Perspective?

Who are some of the great examples of people who can be characterized as selfless givers? John Chrysostom gave¹¹ two examples of people who excelled at generosity: the poverty-stricken woman who gave her last two mites to help the poor (Luke 21:1-4), and the woman who fed Elijah with the last handful of flour she had (1 Kings 17:10-16).

“Once you have lived on what is sufficient; then if you have a mind to emulate that widow, we will lead you on to greater things than these. For you have not yet attained to the philosophy of that woman¹², who gave the two mites, while you are anxious about what is sufficient for your needs. She soared higher than this; for what was to have been her support; that she cast in, all of it. Will you then still distress yourself about necessary things; and do you not blush to be outdone and left far behind by a woman? For she did not say the things we say, ‘But what if when I have spent all, I am compelled to beg of another?’ In her generosity she stripped herself of all she had. What shall we say of the widow in the time of the prophet Elijah? The risk she ran was not of poverty, but of death, and not her own only, but her children’s too. She had no expectation of receiving anything from others, but she expected to die shortly. ‘But,’ one said, ‘she saw the prophet, and that made her generous.’ But you see saints without number! You see the Lord of the prophets asking alms, and yet you do not become humane; even though you have coffers spewing one into another, you do not even give out of your excess. Was he a prophet that came to her, and did this persuade her to so great a generosity? This deserves much admiration, that she was persuaded that he was a great and wonderful person. For how was it that she, a barbarian woman and a foreigner, did not say, ‘If he were a prophet, he would not have begged of me. If he were a friend of God, He would not have neglected him. If the Jews are suffering this punishment of famine because of sins, why does this man suffer?’ But she entertained none of these thoughts; but opened her heart and

¹¹ John Chrysostom, *Homilies on 2 Corinthians*, XIX, v. 9.

¹² The poor widow who Jesus commended for contributing two mites to the Treasury for the help of the poor (Luke 21:1-4).

her house to him, and set before him all she had. She put nature aside, disregarded her children, and preferred the stranger to everyone. Consider then how great punishment will be laid up for us, if we are weaker than a foreigner, a barbarian woman, who knew nothing of the things, which we know! Just because we have strength of body, we are not automatically manly persons. Hear how Christ proclaims her! For He said, ‘There were many widows in the days of Elijah, and to none of them was the prophet sent but to her’” (Luke 4:25, 26).

“Shall I say something great and startling? This woman gave more to hospitality, than our father Abraham. For she did not ‘run to the herd’ as he did (Genesis 18:7), but by that ‘handful’ (1 Kings 17:12) outstripped all that have been renowned for hospitality. For in this was Abraham’s excellence that he entertained God; but hers, in that for the sake of the stranger she did not spare her children, even though she did not look for the things to come (Hebrews 11:9-10). But we, though a heaven exists, though a hell is threatened, though God has done such great things for us, we sink back listlessly. Let it not be so; let us ‘scatter abroad’, let us ‘give to the poor’ as we ought to give. For what is much and what little, God defines, not by the measure of what is given, but by the extent of the wealth of him that gives.”

Gregory the Great, Pope of Rome, had¹³ some encouragement and admonition to those who give compassionately to others. There are dangers such as pride, vainglory, and self-centeredness to watch out for, and there is a knowledge of and concern for those they serve to pay attention to. There are many references to this in the Scriptures that Gregory had words of illumination on. The bottom line is that giving is a work of God and it requires the insight of the Holy Spirit regarding when and what to give.

“Those who already give compassionately of their own should be admonished differently than those who desire to seize even what belongs to others. For those who already give are to be admonished not to lift themselves up in swelling thought above those to whom they impart earthly things. They should not think themselves better than others because they see others supported by them. Those who give should acknowledge themselves to be placed by the Lord as dispensers of temporal supplies, and to do their work all the more humbly from their understanding that the things which they dispense are not their own. When they consider that they are appointed for the service of others, by no means let vainglory elate their minds, but let fear depress them. Also it is needful for them to take anxious thought lest they distribute what has been committed to them unworthily; lest they bestow something to those on whom they ought to have spent nothing; or much to those on whom they ought to have spent little. Some dangers are that by hastiness they scatter unprofitably what they give; by tardiness they mischievously torment petitioners; or lest the thought of receiving a favor in return creep in. Other dangers are that the craving for transitory praise might extinguish the light of giving; that accompanying gloominess harass the offering of a gift; and that when they have done everything right, they give something to themselves, and so lose all the benefit they have accomplished.”

Gregory commented on references to giving in the Scriptures as follows:

¹³ Gregory the Great, The Book of Pastoral Rule, III, 20.

- If any man serves as a deacon, let him do it as with the ability which God supplies (1 Peter 4:11). Donors should not attribute to themselves the virtue of their liberality.
- When you shall have done all those things, which are commanded you, say, ‘We are unprofitable slaves, we have done that which was our duty to do’ (Luke 17:10). Donors should not rejoice too much in benefits they bestow.
- God loves a cheerful giver (2 Corinthians 9:7). Gloominess should not spoil a donor’s liberality.
- Do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing (Matthew 6:3). Donors should not seek transitory praise for a gift bestowed.
- When you give a dinner, do not ask your friends, your brethren, your kinsmen, or your rich neighbors, lest they invite you back, and you are repaid. But when you give a feast, call the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind and you shall be blessed; for they cannot repay you (Luke 14:12). Do not let the glory of the present life mix itself with the liberal giving of piety. Donors may not require a return for benefits bestowed.
- Do not say to your friend, go and come back, and tomorrow I will give it, when you have it with you (Proverbs 3:28). Donors should not supply too late what should be supplied at once.
- He that sows sparingly shall reap also sparingly (2 Corinthians 9:6). When much is necessary for donors to give, little should not be given.
- I do not mean that others should be eased and you burdened; but by an equality, that your abundance may supply their lack, and that their abundance also may supply your lack (2 Corinthians 8:13, 14). When donors ought to give little, they should not give too much, lest afterwards, badly enduring want themselves, break out into impatience.
- Give to everyone that asks of you (Luke 6:30). Donors should avoid giving nothing at all to those on whom they ought to bestow something.
- Give to the godly man, and do not help a sinner; do well to him that is lowly, but do not give to the ungodly (Ecclesiasticus 12:4-5 LXX). Donors should give nothing, not even something little, to those on whom they ought to bestow nothing at all.

John Chrysostom noted¹⁴ that men return one favor with another; God will certainly do the same to us if we give even a little from our abundance. Some people worry that they will not have enough if they give to others. Chrysostom encouraged his people to try to live with just essentials.

“A man who has received from you will not overlook the gifts, but will return the favors if he can; much more will Christ do so. If He routinely gives without receiving any return, how will He not give after receiving from you? ‘What then,’ said one, ‘when some who have spent much come to need other men’s help?’ You speak of those that have spent their all; when you yourself don’t give a penny. Promise to strip yourself of everything and then ask questions about such men. As long as you are stingy and give little of your substance, why

¹⁴ John Chrysostom, Homilies on 2 Corinthians, XIX, v. 9.

throw out excuses and pretenses? I am not leading you to the lofty peak of complete poverty, but for the present I ask you to cut off your excess and to desire just sufficiency, which means using just those things, which it is impossible to live without. No one bars you from these, nor forbids you your daily food. I say food, not feasting; clothing, not ornament. If one should inquire accurately, this is in the best sense really feasting. Consider which we should say more truly feasted, he whose diet was herbs, and who was in sound health; or he who had the table of a Sybarite¹⁵, and was full of disorders? Very plainly the former! Therefore let us seek nothing more than this. Let him that can be satisfied with beans and can keep in good health, seek for nothing more. Let him who is weaker and requires a diet including garden herbs, not be hindered by this. But if anyone is even weaker than this and requires the support of meat in moderation, we will not bar him either. We are not trying to injure anyone, but just trying to encourage men not to require more than they need.”

The Fruits of Righteousness

Paul prayed not for riches nor for abundance, but for all sufficiency. In fleshly things, he asked for a sufficiency for them; but in spiritual things for abundance. Not in alms giving only but in all other things also, ‘unto every good work’ (2 Corinthians 9:8).

John Chrysostom gave¹⁶ an example that is equally appropriate for the 4th Century and the 21st Century. Noticing what people do with their money, he said,

“Do you not see how much others give to actors and harlots? Give at any rate the half to Christ as what they give to dancers. As much as they give for seeing vain shows on the stage (or screen), so much at any rate one ought to give to the hungry. For they clothe the sex kittens with untold gold; but not even with a threadbare garment the flesh of Christ, and that though beholding it naked¹⁷. What forgiveness does this deserve? How great a punishment does it not deserve, when he indeed bestows so much on her that ruins and shames him, but not the least thing on Him that saves him and makes him brighter? As long as one spends it on his belly and on drunkenness and dissipation, one never thinks of poverty. But when there is a need to relieve poverty, he becomes poorer than anybody. When feeding parasites and flatterers, he is as joyous as though he had fountains to spend from. But if he happens to see a poor man, then the fear of poverty besets him”.

There are other things one can sow besides generosity (or lack of it). One can sow righteousness; doing so reaps kindness (Hosea 10:12). On the other hand, one can sow wickedness; this will reap injustice and lies (Hosea 10:13). Therefore, it behooves us to sow what we wish to receive. As a country, the United States has been a world leader regarding charitable giving of all kinds, and this has not been limited to Christians. This fact alone has greatly helped the United States to maintain godliness, prosperity and justice because it teaches

¹⁵ Sybaris was an ancient Greek city in Southern Italy, founded in 720 BC and destroyed in 510 BC. It was famous as a center of luxurious living.

¹⁶ John Chrysostom, Homilies on 2 Corinthians, XIX, v. 9.

¹⁷ The reference here is the ‘least of these My brethren’ (Matthew 25:38-40).

an unselfish attitude to the world. On the other hand, some surveys indicate that people in the United States spend large amounts of their income on various forms of entertainment. We can all do better by directing a little more of our income from entertainment toward feeding the poor.

Chrysostom concluded¹⁸, “For this is the thing to be admired, that when they are kept, they are lost; but when dispersed abroad they abide forever. Now by ‘righteousness’ (2 Corinthians 9:10), here, he means love toward men. For this makes men righteous, consuming sins like a fire when it is plentifully poured out”.

Cyprian stated¹⁹ very strongly that there is a relationship between one’s salvation and the giving of alms, and he illustrated this with the examples of Zacchaeus and Abraham. One who gives alms implicitly believes in God; he shows his faith by his giving of alms and exhibits the fruits of righteousness. Those who don’t are barren and unfruitful. This may appear to Western Christians today as a works-based salvation, but perhaps they neglect to consider what is really going on in men’s hearts. On the other hand, some people may fear that their estate may become exhausted if they give alms; this only shows unbelief and lack of faith. A larger concern is that we may lose our own soul out of a love for mammon if we refuse to give alms.

“Christ called those people the children of Abraham whom He sees aiding and nourishing the poor. For when Zacchaeus said, ‘Behold, the half of my goods I give to the poor; and if I have done any wrong to any man, I restore fourfold’. Jesus answered and said, ‘Salvation has this day come to this house, for he also is a son of Abraham’ (Luke 19:8-9). For if Abraham believed in God, and it was counted to him for righteousness²⁰, certainly he who gives alms according to God’s precept believes in God, and he who has the truth of faith maintains the fear of God. Moreover, he who maintains the fear of God considers God in showing mercy to the poor. He labors thus because he believes; he knows that what is foretold by God’s word is true, that unfruitful trees, that is, unproductive men, are cut off and cast into the fire, but that the merciful are called into the Kingdom. He also, in another place, calls laboring and fruitful men faithful; but He denies faith to unfruitful and barren ones, saying, ‘If you have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, who will commit to you that which is true? And if you have not been faithful in that which is another man’s, who shall give you that which is your own?’” (Luke 16:11-12)

“If you fear that your inheritance might be exhausted by your liberal dealing, and you may be reduced to poverty, be of good courage in this respect; that cannot be exhausted where the service of Christ is supplied, where the heavenly work is celebrated. I don’t speak for this on my own authority; but I promise it on the faith of the Holy Scriptures, and on the authority of the divine promise. The Holy Spirit speaks by Solomon, ‘He that gives to the poor shall never lack, but he that turns away his eye shall be in great poverty’ (Proverbs 28:27), showing that the merciful and those who do good works cannot lack, but rather that the sparing and barren come to be needy. Moreover, the blessed Paul says: ‘He that supplies seed to the sower, shall both supply bread for your food,

¹⁸ John Chrysostom, Homilies on 2 Corinthians, XIX, v. 9.

¹⁹ Cyprian of Carthage, Treatises, VIII, 8-11.

²⁰ See Genesis 15:6; Romans 4:3, 20-22, Galatians 3:6, James 2:23 for more discussion.

and shall multiply your seed sown, and shall increase the growth of the fruits of your righteousness, that in all things you may be enriched' (2 Corinthians 9:10-11). And again, 'The administration of this service shall not only supply the needs of the saints, but shall be abundant also by many thanksgivings to God' (2 Corinthians 9:12). While thanks are directed to God for our almsgivings and labors by the prayer of the poor, the wealth of the doer is increased by the retribution of God. And the Lord in the Gospel, already considering the hearts of men of this kind, and with foreseeing voice denouncing faithless and unbelieving men, bears witness, and says, 'Take no thought, saying, What shall we eat? What shall we drink? How shall we be clothed? For these things the Gentiles seek. And your Father knows that you have need of all these things. Seek first the kingdom of God, and His righteousness; and all these things shall be added to you' (Matthew 6:31-33). All these things shall be added and given to them who seek the kingdom and righteousness of God. For the Lord says, that when the Day of Judgment shall come, those who have labored in His Church are admitted to receive the kingdom."

"If you are afraid that your estate should fail if you begin to donate liberally from it, there is another thing to fear. While you fear for your family property, life itself, and salvation are failing. While you are anxious about your wealth being diminished, you do not see that you yourself are being diminished, in that you are a lover of mammon more than of your own soul. You fear, for the sake of yourself, that you should lose your inheritance, you yourself are perishing for the sake of your inheritance. Therefore, the apostle well exclaims, 'We brought nothing into this world, neither can we carry anything out. Therefore, having food and clothing, let us be content. For they who will be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many and hurtful desires, which drown a man in perdition and in destruction. For covetousness is a root of all evils, which some desiring, have made shipwreck from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows'" (1 Timothy 6:7-10).

"When has it ever happened, that resources have failed the righteous man, since it is written, 'The Lord will not slay with famine the righteous soul?' (Proverbs 10:3). Ravens fed Elijah in the desert (1 Kings 17:4-6); and a meal from heaven was made ready for Daniel in the den²¹, when shut up by the king's command for a prey to the lions (Daniel 6:7-27). Are you afraid that food should be lacking to you, laboring and deserving well of the Lord, although He Himself bears witness, for the rebuke of those whose mind is doubtful and faith small? He says, 'Behold the fowls of heaven, that they do not sow, reap, or gather into barns; and your heavenly Father feeds them; are you not of more value than they?' (Matthew 6:26). God feeds the fowls, and daily food is given to the sparrows; and to creatures, which have no sense of things divine there is no lack of drink or food. Do you think that to a Christian, a servant of the Lord, one given up to good works, that to one that is dear to his Lord, anything will be lacking?"

²¹ Lancelot C. L. Brenton, The Septuagint with Apocrypha, Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody MA 01961, 1990, p. 138. Bel and the Dragon 1:30-39.

John Cassian noted²² that the fruit of our righteousness is not due just to our own efforts, but it has a great deal to do with the mercy of God in many ways. Using the example of a farmer, hard work is necessary, but this is of no avail without the right amount of rain, freedom from insect damage and accidents. Even our good thoughts come from God! We need to humbly follow the mercy of God, and the fruits of our obedience will become apparent with our efforts.

- The farmer cannot ascribe the produce of the crops and the rich fruits to his own exertions. He finds that these are often in vain unless opportune rains and a quiet and calm winter aids them.
- Divine goodness does not grant these rich crops to idle farmers who do not till their fields by frequent plowing; working all night long is of no use to the workers unless the mercy of the Lord prospers it.
- Human pride should never try to put itself on a level with the grace of God, so as to fancy that its own efforts were the cause of Divine bounty, or to boast that a very plentiful crop of fruit was an answer to the merits of its own exertions. Crops sometimes fail either from too much or from too little rain.
- Even when vigor has been granted by the Lord to the oxen, and bodily health and the power to do all the work, and prosperity in undertakings, still a man must pray lest there come to him, as Scripture says, ‘a heaven of brass and an earth of iron’ (Deuteronomy 28:23).
- Insects can cause devastating results, such as, ‘What the chewing locust left, the swarming locust has eaten; what the swarming locust left, the crawling locust has eaten; and what the crawling locust left, the consuming locust has eaten’ (Joel 1:4).
- The farmer in his work needs God’s help also to avoid accidents, by which the man may be deprived of what he has hoped for and actually loses the abundant fruits, which he has already gathered and stored in the barn.

From which we infer that the initiative of our actions and good thoughts comes from God, who inspires us with a good will to begin with, and supplies us with the opportunity of carrying out what we rightly desire. ‘Every good gift and every perfect gift comes down from above, from the Father of lights’ (James 1:17), who both begins what is good, and continues it and completes it in us. ‘But He who gives seed to the sower will both provide bread to eat and will multiply your seed and make the fruits of your righteousness to increase’ (2 Corinthians 9:10). But it is for us, humbly to follow day by day the grace of God which is drawing us, or else if we resist with ‘a stiff neck’ (Exodus 32:9), and ‘uncircumcised ears’ (Acts 7:51), we shall deserve to hear the words, ‘Shall he that falls, not rise again? And he that is turned away, shall he not turn back again? Why have my people turned away with a shameless revolting, and strengthened themselves in their willfulness, and refused to return?’” (Jeremiah 8:4-5).

²² John Cassian, 3rd Conference of Abbot Chaeremon, II, xiii, 3.

Helping the Poor with “Unrighteous Mammon”

In commenting on the Parable of the Unjust Steward, Jesus made some statements about serving God versus serving mammon, where mammon generally represents the things of this world and specifically it represents all the resources of money directed to various pleasures²³. In saying thus, Jesus made a statement about making “friends by unrighteous mammon”, which is a difficult statement to understand. The text of what Jesus said is:

“So the master commended the unjust steward because he had dealt shrewdly. For the sons of this world are shrewder in their generation than the sons of light. And I say to you, make friends for yourselves by unrighteous mammon, that when it fails, they may receive you into an everlasting home. He who *is* faithful in *what is* least is faithful also in much; and he who is unjust in *what is* least is unjust also in much. If you have not been faithful with unrighteous mammon, who will commit true *riches* to your trust? And if you have not been faithful in what is another man's, who will give you what is your own? No servant can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon” (Luke 16:8-13).

Christ explained that whatever is done to one of His disciples, He accepts as if done to Himself (Matthew 25:31-46). He also said, “He that receives you; receives Me; and he that doesn't receive you, rejects Me” (Matthew 10:40, Luke 10:16). He continues, “Despise not one of these little ones; for their angels always behold the face of My Father in heaven” (Matthew 18:10). And in another place, “Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom of heaven” (Luke 12:32). Similarly also He says that “the least in the kingdom of heaven”, that is His own disciple, “is greater than John, the greatest among those born of women” (Matthew 11:11). And again, “He that receives a righteous man or a prophet in the name of a righteous man or a prophet, shall receive their reward; and he that gives to a disciple in the name of a disciple a cup of cold water to drink, shall not lose his reward” (Matthew 10:41-42). This is the only reward that Christ specifies is not lost.

Clement of Alexandria commented²⁴ on these statements by Christ to say that He wants us to seek out those to be kind to with our gifts, since we are, in effect, giving to Him. By delighting in giving to Him, we are exchanging the perishing things of this world, the unrighteous mammon, for eternal life. The poor man that we donate to ends up being a friend of God in that he receives our gifts on behalf of God. This may sound to some like it is perilously close to the selling of indulgences for forgiveness of sins, but actually it is a way of life that is 180 degrees different. The point is in considering the real value of the things of this world as compared to the Kingdom of God.

“Christ shows that by nature all property, which a man possesses in his own power, is not his own. From this unrighteousness it is permitted to work a righteous and saving thing, to refresh someone of those who have an everlasting habitation with the Father. He has not commanded you to wait to be asked, but commands you to seek those who are to be benefited and are worthy disciples of the Savior. Excellent also is Paul's saying, ‘The Lord loves a cheerful giver’ (2

²³ Clement of Alexandria, Stromata, VII, 12.

²⁴ Clement of Alexandria, Salvation of the Rich Man, 31-33.

Corinthians 9:7), who delights in giving, sparing not, sowing so that he may thus reap, without murmuring, disputing, and regret, which is pure benevolence. But better than this is the saying spoken by the Lord in another place, ‘Give to everyone that asks you’ (Luke 6:30). Truly such is God’s delight in giving. And this saying is above all godliness, not to wait to be asked, but to inquire oneself who deserves to receive kindness.”

“He appoints such a reward for liberality, an everlasting habitation! One purchases immortality for money; and, by giving the perishing things of the world, receives in exchange for these an eternal mansion in the heavens! Sail to this supermarket, if you are wise, O rich man! If need be, sail around the whole world. Do not spare peril and work, that you may purchase here the heavenly kingdom. Why do transparent stones and emeralds delight you so much, and a house that is fuel for fire, a plaything of time, the sport of the earthquake, or an occasion for a tyrant’s outrage? Desire to dwell in the heavens, and to reign with God! This kingdom a man imitating God²⁵ will give you. By receiving a little here, a little there, He will make you a dweller with Him. Ask that you may receive this benefit; for Christ (in the poor man) is not commanded to receive, but you to give. The Lord said to make a friend, but a friend proves himself such by long intimacy. It is not faith, love, hope, or the endurance of one day, but ‘he that endures to the end shall be saved’” (Matthew 10:22).

“Who is it that is the friend of God and how then does he give these things to us as we donate to the poor? Do you judge who is worthy or who is unworthy to receive your alms? It is possible you may be mistaken in your opinion. It is better to do good to the undeserving for the sake of the deserving, than by guarding against those that are less good, you fail to give to the good. For by sparing some, it is possible for you to neglect some that are loved by God. By offering to all that need, you must find someone of those who have power with God to save. ‘Judge not, then, that you be not judged. With what measure you use, it shall be measured back to you; good measure, pressed and shaken, and running over, shall be given to you’ (Matthew 7:1-2, Luke 6:37-38). Open your compassion to all who are enrolled as the disciples of God; not looking contemptuously to personal appearance, nor preferring young or old. Do not fret in soul and turn away if one appears penniless, ragged, ugly, or feeble. Within may dwell the hidden Father, and His Son, who died for us and rose with us.”

John Chrysostom stated²⁶ that Jesus was definitely speaking of almsgiving when He spoke about “making friends by unrighteousness mammon”. The “unrighteous mammon” refers generally to all kinds of ill-gotten gains, and Chrysostom addressed what to do about it once one has ceased his acquisition of the ill-gotten gains. The answer is to spend this “unrighteous mammon” by lending it to God in the form of almsgiving.

“When Christ said, ‘Make friends for yourselves’, he did not stop at this only, but He added, ‘by unrighteous mammon’ (Luke 16:9); that the good work may be your own; for it is nothing else but almsgiving, which He has here signified. For what He said is like this: ‘Do you have ill-gotten gains? Spend

²⁵ That is, he imitates God by being “one of the least of these My brethren” (Matthew 25:40).

²⁶ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Matthew, V, 8-9.

well! Have you gathered by unrighteousness? Scatter abroad in righteousness'. And yet, what manner of virtue is this, to give out of ill-gotten gains? God, however, being full of love to man, condescends even to this and if we do this, promises us many good things. But we are unfeeling, that we don't give even of our unjust gain; plundering without end, if we contribute the smallest part, we think we have fulfilled everything. Have you not heard Paul saying, 'He who sows sparingly, shall also reap sparingly?' (2 Corinthians 9:6) Why then do you spare? If you had to till a rich and deep soil, that was capable of receiving much seed, you would both spend what you had, and would borrow of other men, since withholding investment in such a case would be a loss. But when it is Heaven, which you are to cultivate, which is exposed to no variation of weather, and will surely repay your outlay with abundant increase, you are slow and backward. You do not consider that it is possible by withholding investment to lose, and by being generous to gain."

"Disperse therefore, that you may not lose; spend, that you may gain. If your treasures are hoarded, you will surely throw them away; entrust them to God, for then no man plunders them. When you do business, you don't know at all how to gain; lend to Him who gives an interest greater than the principal. Lend where there is no envy, accusation, evil design, or fear. Lend to Him who lacks nothing, yet has need for your sake; who feeds all men, yet is hungry, that you may not suffer famine; who is poor, that you may be rich. Lend there, where your return cannot be death, but life instead. For His interest is the herald of a kingdom, while this world's interest speaks of hell; one comes of self-denial, the other of covetousness; one comes of humanity, the other of cruelty."