

## *Mercy Giving*

We are approaching quickly the holiday season. First on the list is Thanksgiving, a time when we render thanks to God for all of his abundant provisions for us. While Thanksgiving is not, in the strictest sense, a biblical holiday, it is, most certainly, grounded in a fundamental biblical principle. Giving thanks to God for his blessings is an essential difference between idolaters and true worshipers of God according to what Paul says in Romans 1. So, it is good to give thanks to the Lord. And it is good that we have a special day set aside to focus upon this giving of thanks.

As we are giving thanks for all the many wonderful blessings God has given to us, we need to remember that God's blessings are not simply personal privileges that we enjoy, but God's blessings are also a *calling*. We are blessed in order that we might be a blessing to others around us. One of the ways that we do that at CPC is the collection for and distribution of baskets of food around the Thanksgiving season. This is one shape that *almsgiving* takes for us. I have mentioned the giving of alms in the past and we say something about alms every Lord's Day when the collection is taken during the Lord's Service. Though I will be dealing with this in our upcoming series in Matthew, I want to take this opportunity in our inaugural newsletter to give a brief explanation of alms.

### *What are alms?*

I suppose some of us have heard the word "alms" in some form or fashion in our lives. Our various Bible translations have the word "alms" in places like Matthew 6 where Jesus deals with how we are to give alms. We also see a beggar outside of the Temple in Acts 3 asking for alms of Peter and John. But what exactly are alms? Well, our English word *alms* is derived from a Greek word which is in the family of words meaning "mercy" or "compassion." Generally speaking, then, alms are acts of mercy or compassion upon those in need. Many times the giving of alms takes the form of money, but alms can be given in various ways. Giving food to those who are hungry, clothing those who are in need of clothes, housing those who need shelter, or giving your time to help those in need are all acts of mercy which would make them alms.

Now lots of people do good things for other people in the world. There are organizations out there that have nothing to do with Christ's Church that do many of the things mentioned above and more. What makes what we do different from what they do? Are they not being merciful? The acts of non-Christians toward other people can be considered good works in one sense. They are helping other people. Where the works fall short is the difference I mentioned in the opening of this article: they are not being offered up as worship to God. Herein lies the difference between a faithful Christian's almsgiving and the philanthropy of those outside of Christ's Church. Our almsgiving comes from (or should come from!) a heart of gratitude to God and be offered up to him as a proper sacrifice or act of worship. The fact that alms are of this nature is clearly seen in Scripture. For example, when the angel of God appears to God-fearer Cornelius in Acts 10, he tells him, "Your prayers and your alms have come up for a memorial before God" (v. 4). A memorial in Scripture is something by which God remembers his covenant and acts in accordance with the promises he has made. Cornelius's almsgiving along with his prayers were acts of worship which God saw. Shortly after this God sends Peter to his house and brings Cornelius into this new creation he is making in which he is joining Jew and Gentile into the same family. God acted in accordance with his promise when he saw the prayer and acts of mercy of Cornelius.

Then there is also what is said in Hebrews 13.16: “But do not forget to do good and to share, for with such sacrifices God is well pleased.” The “doing good” and “sharing” involve giving to those in need. The church during the times of the apostles had to live this out in a way that we can only imagine. As they were losing their jobs and status because of their faith in Christ, they had to sell the things that they had and share with one another in the church. This is what we read about in the early chapters of Acts. Paul’s missionary journeys had as a major component collecting for the needs of the poor, especially the poor brothers in Judea (see e.g., Ac 11.27-30; 1 Cor 16.1; 2 Cor 9.1ff.; Gal 2.10). Almsgiving was not seen as something that was merely a good but dispensable thing to do. It was understood as an aspect of the believers’ worship of God.

This association with being a memorial carried on in the life of the church after the apostles. In one of the earlier descriptions we have of post-apostolic worship, the relief of the poor was associated with Communion or the Eucharist. A man by the name of Justin, who came to be known as the Martyr (that wasn’t his last name), wrote a defense of the Christian faith to the Roman Emperor at the time, explaining what Christians do and why they do it. Here is how Justin describes one part of the Christian worship:

And we afterwards continually remind each other of these things [i.e., the things written by the apostles concerning Jesus]. And *the wealthy among us help the needy*; and we always keep together; and for all things wherewith we are supplied, we bless the Maker of all through His Son Jesus Christ, and through the Holy Ghost. And on the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together to one place, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits; then, when the reader has ceased, the president verbally instructs, and exhorts to the imitation of these good things. Then we all rise together and pray, and, as we before said, when our prayer is ended, bread and wine and water are brought, and the president in like manner offers prayers and thanksgivings, according to his ability, and the people assent, saying Amen; and there is a distribution to each, and a participation of that over which thanks have been given, and *to those who are absent a portion is sent by the deacons. And they who are well to do, and willing, give what each thinks fit; and what is collected is deposited with the president, who succours [i.e., helps] the orphans and widows and those who, through sickness or any other cause, are in want, and those who are in bonds and the strangers sojourning among us, and in a word takes care of all who are in need...* (First Apology, ch. 67, emphasis mine)

There is biblical warrant for our tithes and offerings being associated with the Lord’s Supper or Eucharist. This is why we have our collection just before Communion and presented with the bread and wine in the Lord’s Service. But this is also a reminder that as we give thanks to God (which is what the word “Eucharist” means) for what he has provided we are also being called to take God’s blessings to a needy world. The giving of money to relieve the poor is an act of worship not mere philanthropy.

### ***Why do we give alms?***

Our motivation as Christians for giving alms is rooted in the mercy that our God has shown us. We show mercy (i.e., give alms) because mercy has been shown to us. We are to be “imitators of God as dear children” as Paul says in Eph. 5.1. In various places we see that we are

to display to others that which God has shown to us. For example, in Matt. 18 we learn that we are to forgive others just as God has forgiven us. Paul says this in short form just before he tells us to be imitators of God (cf. Eph 4.32). God is renewing us in his image. God is a merciful God and, therefore, we are to be merciful as well. The mercy of God flows inside and outside of his family. So it should be with us. We are to take care of our own (i.e., those in the family of God), and we are to care for those who are outside of the family as we have the ability (cf. Gal 6.10). We are to do these things because we are to be reflecting the mercy of God in this world.

Our God has always been concerned for the poor. He gives specific laws to his people in the Old Covenant to make sure that they do not neglect the needs of the poor. Dealing with those who are especially within the land, God says to his people:

If there is among you a poor man of your brethren, within any of the gates in your land which YHWH your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart nor shut your hand from your poor brother, but you shall open your hand wide to him and willingly lend him sufficient for his need, whatever he needs. Beware lest there be a wicked thought in your heart, saying, 'The seventh year, the year of release, is at hand,' and your eye be evil against your poor brother and you give him nothing, and he cry out to YHWH against you, and it become sin among you. You shall surely give to him, and your heart should not be grieved when you give to him, because for this thing YHWH your God will bless you in all your works and in all to which you put your hand. For the poor will never cease from the land; therefore I command you, saying, 'You shall open your hand wide to your brother, to your poor and your needy, in your land.' (Deut 15.7-11).

God also established laws concerning the harvesting of fields so that the poor of the land might be provided for. Those who planted fields were to leave the corners of the field to be gleaned by the poor of the land (cf. Lev 19.10; Deut 24.21). God was concerned about showing mercy to the poor of the land.

God was also concerned about showing mercy to the stranger; i.e., the non-resident sojourner in the land. The gleaning laws were also for the poor stranger (Lev 19.10). God had specific laws for the treatment of the stranger: “And if a stranger dwells with you in your land, you shall not mistreat him. The stranger who dwells among you shall be to you as one born among you, and you shall love him as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am YHWH your God” (Lev 19.33-34). The people of God had been shown mercy when strangers. Now they are, in turn, to show mercy to others.

This responsibility is not something that is forsaken when Jesus brings in the kingdom. In his Sermon on the Mount Jesus, giving the new law as the new Moses, prescribes the giving of alms as part of our responsibility. In fact, it is so much assumed that we will be giving alms that Jesus only tells us *how* to give alms, not *that* we should give alms. Jesus said to his disciples, “*when* you give alms.” This is just standard kingdom living.

### ***How do we give alms?***

Almsgiving is to be done without a big show. We are not to give alms in order to be seen by others. This does not mean that we should avoid people seeing us. That could well nigh be impossible at times. Our motivations, though, should not be to be lauded for the good deeds that we are doing. Giving of alms is no extraordinary act of a Christian. It is standard Christian duty. And when we have done what we are supposed to do, we are to say that we are unprofitable

servants, we have done that which is our duty to do (Luk 17.10). Special recognition is not something we should expect from fulfilling our responsibilities, so that should not be the motivation for giving alms.

Alms are given as we have the ability to give. In this way it is different from the tithe which is a set ten percent. Some of us have more ability than others. For example, Paul instructs Timothy on how to instruct people in the church: “Command those who are rich in this present age not to be haughty, nor to trust in uncertain riches but in the living God, who gives us richly all things to enjoy. *Let them* do good, that they be rich in good works, ready to give, willing to share, storing up for themselves a good foundation for the time to come, that they may lay hold on eternal life” (1 Tim 6.17-19). Sometimes, though, the giving can go beyond that which is convenient or easy for us to give. Paul commends the churches in Macedonia for doing this very thing.

Moreover, brethren, we make known to you the grace of God bestowed on the churches of Macedonia: that in a great trial of affliction the abundance of their joy and their deep poverty abounded in the riches of their liberality. For I bear witness that according to *their* ability, yes, and beyond *their* ability, *they were* freely willing, imploring us with much urgency that we would receive the gift and the fellowship of the ministering to the saints. And not *only* as we had hoped, but they first gave themselves to the Lord, and *then* to us by the will of God. (2 Cor 8.1-5)

Many alms-deeds that have occurred in the history of CPC. Whenever there has been a call to meet particular needs in the congregation or elsewhere, the members of CPC have always risen to the call and met those needs. There will be times in the future that we will meet special challenges which will require special offerings. But almsgiving should be a regular part of our worship. The money collected in our alms chest and presented with our tithes during Covenant Renewal provides our deacons with the ability to display the mercy of God to those with genuine needs in our particular church as well as those who are outside. So, as you are able, make this a part of your regular worship, aiding the Church in showing the mercy that is worthy of Christ's name.