

CHAPTER EIGHT

That Which is Considered Almsgiving

BACKGROUND: At the close of Chapter Seven, Paul expressed joy that the faith of the Corinthian Christians has been strengthened. He now points to the generous almsgiving of the Christians in Macedonia, from where he writes, to encourage further growth in this area of the spiritual lives of the Corinthians through emulation.

8:1-2. 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. The Christians in Macedonia had suffered great persecution and had lost most of their worldly possessions. Yet through the grace of God which comes to those who are obedient to Him in spite of tribulation, they did not become despondent. On the contrary, they were filled with the joy of the Lord. Their love for God manifested itself in a generous offering for the poor of the church in Jerusalem, the mother church. Notice that Paul said *the riches of their liberality*, not of their gifts. The amount involved may have been small in comparison to that given by others but was abundant considering their situation.

Just as their great affliction gave birth to great joy, their great poverty gave rise to greatness in almsgiving...for bountifulness is determined not by the measure of what is given but by the mind of those who bestow it.

CHRYSOSTOM¹

8:3-4. 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. They gave willingly from the little they had and pleaded with Paul to use them and what they offered for his ministry.

Paul mentions three reasons to praise the Macedonians: that they bear trials nobly; that they know how to pity; and that, though poor, they are generous in almsgiving.

CHRYSOSTOM²

8:5. And this they did, not as we had hoped, but first gave themselves to the Lord and then to us by the will of God. Their response was beyond what Paul had hoped for because it was fruit of their strong commitment to Christ. They eagerly followed Paul's guidance in this and other spiritual matters because they recognized him as the one through whom God worked for their spiritual enrichment.

8:6. So we urged Titus, that as he had begun, so he would also complete this grace in you as well. Paul had urged Titus to continue his ministry to the Corinthians by giving them further guidance in almsgiving—a very important part of the Christian life.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT: (a). Is all giving considered almsgiving? Does God acknowledge giving which comes from those who do not believe in Him or His Son as the Messiah but who give because they are kind or because they like the gratitude their giving brings?

8:7-8. But as you abound in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in all diligence, and

in your love for us—see that you abound in this grace also. I speak not by commandment, but I am testing the sincerity of your love by the diligence of others. Paul is not demanding that they give, nor dictating the amount. Almsgiving is a reflection of love. True love reaches outward to others.

Whatever fruits of kindness you yield, you gather up for yourself; for the grace of good works and their reward is returned to the giver. Have you given something to a person in need? What you have given becomes yours, and is returned to you with an increase. And as the wheat that falls to the earth brings increase to the one who has thrown it there, so the bread that you give to the hungry will later bring you a great gain. Therefore, let the end of your earthly tilling be the beginning of your heavenly sowing. BASIL³

8:9. For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich. Jesus set the ultimate example of giving. He gave Himself completely, with love as the only motive. He became poor at His Incarnation when He willingly took on a form beneath His heavenly status in glory, power, and position (Phil 2:5-8) so He could unite man with God. Through Him man has access to the riches of Heaven:

...knowledge of godliness, cleansing away of sins, justification, sanctification, the countless good things which He bestows upon us and wants to bestow upon us.

CHRYSOSTOM⁴

FOOD FOR THOUGHT: (b). Must we rid ourselves of all earthly possessions in order to be part of the Kingdom of Heaven?

8:10-11. And in this I give my advice: It is to your advantage not only to be doing what you began and were desiring to do a year ago; but now you also must complete the doing of it; that as there was a readiness to desire it, so there also may be a completion out of what you have. In his first epistle Paul told the Corinthians to begin thinking of what they would give for the work of the Church (1 Cor 16:1-2). He now urges them to complete their collection, to act on their stated intentions.

Here Paul addresses an ever-present danger. Often, after hearing an inspiring sermon or reading a spiritually enlightening book, we are prompted to take a look at our spiritual life. We may vow to do better, to try harder or to give more but then forget those good intentions when we get back into the routine of daily living. It is important that we guard against this lack of spiritual discipline. God honors the intentions of our heart if we are prevented from fulfilling them by circumstances beyond our control but not if they die from neglect.

For what they hear in instructions is indeed pleasing to many people, and they set about the beginning of good works: but soon being wearied by the afflictions that come to them, they abandon the good they have begun.

GREGORY THE GREAT⁵

8:12. For if there is first a willing mind, it is accepted according to what one has and not according to what he does not have. God does not expect everyone to give in equal amounts but to give gladly, according to means.

For what is much and what little God defines, not by the measure of what is given but by the extent of the substance of him that gives. CHRYSOSTOM⁶

8:13-14. *For I do not mean that others should be eased and you burdened; but by an equality, that now at this time your abundance may supply their lack, that their abundance also may supply your lack—that there may be equality.* The church in Jerusalem is rich spiritually but very poor in material effects. Paul is not asking that the Corinthians give to the point of poverty but from their abundance.

You are flourishing in money; they in holiness of life and in boldness towards God. Give to them, therefore, of the money in which you abound but they have not; that you may receive of that boldness wherein they are rich and you are lacking.

CHRYSOSTOM⁷

8:15. *As it is written, “He who gathered much had nothing left over, and he who gathered little had no lack.”* Exodus 16 relates that when the Israelites were journeying through the wilderness, after Moses led them out of Egypt, they began to complain because they were hungry. So the Lord said to Moses: *I will rain bread from Heaven for you. And the people shall go out and gather a certain quota every day, that I may test them, whether they will walk in My law or not.* They were told to gather what they needed for their family: *one omer for each person.* No matter how much anyone gathered, they found they had neither a surplus nor a shortage—God’s way of teaching them to be satisfied that their basic needs were met.

...and to persuade them never to desire to have more nor to grieve at having less.

CHRYSOSTOM⁸

They were expected to work to the extent each was able, gathering that which God had provided. He who was able to gather an abundance could not expect to have more for himself than anyone else. Likewise, he who worked diligently but was unable to fill his quota could be assured that he and his family would not go hungry.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT: (c). What is the present day message of this verse? What is the difference between modern communistic principles and this Christian method of the sharing of resources? (d). Exodus 16:16-24 relates that God told the people to gather only what they needed daily, and to save (hoard) none till the following morning. When they disobeyed, the following morning what they had hoarded *bred worms and stank.* Yet God told them that on the sixth day they could gather a double portion so they would have enough for their needs on the Sabbath, a day of rest, when work was not allowed. On the Sabbath, that which they had saved from the day before *did not stink, nor were any worms in it.* Why? Are there present-day analogies of this incident?

8:16-19. *But thanks be to God, Who puts the same earnest care for you into the heart of Titus. For he not only accepted the exhortation, but being more diligent, he went to you of his own accord. And we have sent with him the brother whose praise is in the Gospel throughout all the churches, and not only that but who was also chosen by the churches to travel with us with this gift, which is administered by us to the glory of the Lord Himself and to show your ready mind...* Paul is grateful for the love and concern Titus exhibits for the Corinthians and for the zeal of his ministry to them. Though it is a long, hard journey, he has agreed to return to them in advance of Paul’s visit to help them understand the merits of almsgiving as Paul requested (2 Cor 8:6) and to help them with the practical application—the collection of the offering. The brother mentioned, who would share responsibilities with Titus, was thought by Chrysostom to be Barnabas.

8:20-23. avoiding this: that anyone should blame us in this lavish gift which is administered by us—providing honorable things, not only in the sight of the Lord, but also in the sight of men. And we have sent with them our brother, whom we have often proved diligent in many things but now much more diligent because of the great confidence which we have in you. If anyone inquires about Titus, he is my partner and fellow worker concerning you. Or if our brethren are inquired about, they are messengers of the churches, the glory of Christ. To handle the monies that are collected in Corinth, Paul is sending three trusted fellow workers. They will take this second epistle from Paul along with them to deliver to the Corinthians, and then travel with Paul to deliver the monetary offering.

Those in authority must be sure that the methods used and the individuals involved in the collection and distribution of money are above reproach, so those who are being asked to give will have no cause to doubt that their offering will be used for good purposes.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT: (e). The collection and utilization of funds is something with which every church community must be concerned. What can be learned from these verses? Is the spiritual value of our almsgiving negated if the money we give is misused?

8:24. Therefore show to them, and before the churches, the proof of your love and of our boasting on your behalf. Paul has praised the Corinthians for their spiritual growth. He has given them the example of the Christians in Macedonia who gave beyond their means because of their love for Christ and His work and has assured them that their money will not be misused. Now he urges them to fulfill their pledge for the church in Jerusalem as proof of their love and faith. Paul's words are very clear: our actions prove our faith.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT: (f). Why is almsgiving considered proof of love and faith?

FOOD FOR THOUGHT COMMENTS

(a). Is all giving considered almsgiving? Does God acknowledge giving which comes from those who do not believe in Him or His Son as the Messiah but who give because they are kind or because they like the gratitude and adulation their giving brings? To give alms is to give willingly and joyfully from our resources with the knowledge that all good things have their source in God and, therefore, belong to Him in the first place. Those who understand this bask in the joy that such giving brings to others and consider that ample reward.

Only that giving which is motivated by belief in God and His Son as Savior is profitable toward the Kingdom of Heaven. Giving must be an outgrowth of, not instead of, a Christ-centered life. If we give without pointing to God through a life which demonstrates faith, we do only a temporary good. Lasting good comes from helping others in this life while directing attention to God, Who alone can satisfy our ultimate need: to be with Him.

To give in order to receive, either praise or returned favors, is to serve one's self, not others, so is

not almsgiving. We must strive to have what we give known only to God. If we accomplish this we will be storing up treasures in Heaven (Mt 6:1-4, 19-20).

It is almsgiving when it is done with willingness, when with bountifulness, when you deem yourself not to give but to receive, when done as if you were benefited, as if gaining and not losing...For he who shows mercy on another ought to feel joyful, not annoyed. For how is it not absurd, if while removing another's downheartedness, you yourself are downhearted?...if you are downhearted because you have delivered another from downheartedness, you furnish an example of extreme cruelty and inhumanity....And why are you downhearted at all, for fear your gold will diminish? If such are your thoughts, do not give at all: if you are not quite sure that it is multiplied for you in Heaven, do not give. You seek recompense here. Why? Let your alms be alms and not bartering.

CHRYSOSTOM⁹

(b). Must we rid ourselves of all earthly possessions in order to be part of the Kingdom of Heaven? As love for God and communion with Him grow, desire for the superfluous things of this world decreases, fostering greater almsgiving. This is why many Saints gave up all their worldly possessions to serve God. It is not necessary, however, to be "poor" to be part of the Kingdom of Heaven, but rather "poor in spirit" (Mt 5:3).

The Kingdom of Heaven shall be given to those whom humility of soul commends rather than the absence of riches....It cannot be doubted that this blessing of humility is more easily attained by the poor than the rich: for while meekness is the companion of those who live in poverty, pride is familiar to the rich. Yet in many among the rich, that spirit is found which uses its abundance not to increase its own inflated pride but in works of goodness and which holds as its greatest gain that which it has bestowed in relieving the misery of another's want. It is given to every kind and rank of men to share in this virtue because those who are unequal in means can be equal in good will; and it does not matter how dissimilar they are in earthly possessions, provided they are found equal in spiritual riches. Blessed therefore is that poverty which is not deluded by a longing for temporal things, which does not hunger to be made rich in the treasure of this world but desires to grow rich in heavenly things.

LEO THE GREAT¹⁰

He who realizes that all he has belongs to God and that he actually owns nothing in this life is poor in spirit, no matter the extent of his earthly possessions. Such a person uses that which he has been entrusted with by God to do God's work, whenever and wherever possible.

Don't despise possessions. And don't despise profits either. After all, possessions are "possessed" by us: they are our servants, not our masters. And profits are "profitable," or they should be.

Wealth is at our disposal, an instrument which can be used well or foolishly. How it is used doesn't depend on the instrument but on the person who is using it. If we use it well, it is a valuable servant—a servant which can do good things for us and for those who depend on us. If we use it badly, it is an unhelpful servant—a servant which causes us and our friends endless harm. We shouldn't blame what is blameless. Wealth in itself is neither good nor evil.

So where does the blame lie for all the evil done in the name of money and possessions? Not in the things themselves: they are harmlessly neutral. The evil is in the mind of man himself—man who by the free will and moral independence God has given him manages what he owns. Human desires express themselves through a man's possessions—desire to impress others, perhaps, or competitive instincts, which drive him always to rival his

affluent neighbor. But those desires can also be noble ones, and express themselves in noble ways. Our money can feed the hungry and clothe the poor.

CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA¹¹

When speaking to the young man who pridefully declared that he had followed God's Commandments all of his life, Jesus said: *If you want to be perfect, go, sell what you have, and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in Heaven; and come, follow Me* (Mk 10:17-22). In response, the young man walked away, *for he had great possessions* and they were very important to him. The wisdom Christ offered this young man was that he had not followed the Commandments as closely as he thought. The first is: *You shall have no other gods before Me* (Ex 20:3). Our "god" is whatever we put first in our lives. This young man's earthly possessions had become his god—though he did not realize it.

Riches did not prevent the young man from coming to receive Baptism, and it is quite wrong to say, as some do, that the Lord told him to dispose of his wealth so he could be baptized.

CLIMACUS¹²

An alcoholic who tries to recover from his dependency knows that even one drink can put him in danger of losing control over his craving for more and more. Similarly, some people have a need to hoard earthly possessions. Unable to keep a healthy attitude toward them, their possessions control them, and all their energies are directed toward increasing their acquisitions. Jesus knew that this particular young man was unable to maintain a spiritually healthy attitude toward what he owned. Freeing himself from them entirely would help him put his focus on spiritual rather than worldly treasure and would help him conquer his pride because "he would learn to accept the charity of others."¹³

Why do you tremble at the thought of poverty, and pursue wealth so ardently? So you won't need anything from anyone?...Don't you see that we are all in need of one another. The soldier of the artisan, the artisan of the merchant, the merchant of the farmer, the slave of the free man, the master of the slave, the poor man of the rich, the rich of the poor, he who does not work of him who gives alms?

...He who receives alms serves a very great need, a need greater than any. For if there were no poor, the greater part of our salvation would be overthrown in that we would not have a place to bestow our wealth. So that even the poor man, who appears to be more useless than any, is the most useful of all.

CHRYSOSTOM¹⁴

(c). What is the present day message of 2 Cor 8:15? What is the difference between modern communistic principles and this Christian method of the sharing of resources? God provides for the needs of His people, as He did with the Israelites. He counsels us to work hard so we will be in a position to provide for our own needs and those of others (Eph 4:28). He expects us to make wise use of the gifts of life, circumstances and ability He has given us, within the confines of obedience to the type of life He asks us to live, and to leave the rest to Him. All that we are able to accomplish in our lifetime we owe to His gifts. Those born into fortunate circumstances, with special abilities, be they intellectual, physical, or material, are what they are with no initial credit to themselves. What counts in God's eyes is what we do with that which we have been given. He who has been given more with which to work (time, talent, treasure) is expected not to hoard but to give of his excess to help those whose abilities and opportunities are fewer (Lk 12:48).

Whether you will it or not, you will leave the gold behind but the glory that is born of good works you carry back to the Lord, where, standing before our common Judge all the people shall call you their nourisher and their benefactor and give you those other names that signify kindness and humanity.

BASIL¹⁵

The Gospel's principles of providing for others differ from communistic principles in that they are not intended to be enforced by a worldly authority. Rather, they find their power in the willing hearts of those touched by Christ's teachings. They encourage rather than destroy individual initiative.

Help the afflicted. Comfort those in sorrow. You who are strong, help the weak. You who are rich, help the poor. You who stand upright, help the fallen and the crushed. You who are joyful, comfort those in sadness. You who enjoy all good fortune, help those who have met with disaster. Give something to God in thanksgiving that you are of those who can give help, not of those who stand and wait for it; that you have no need to look to another's hands, but that others must look to yours. Grow rich, not only in substance but also in piety; not only in gold but also in virtue; or rather, only in virtue. Be more honored than your neighbor by showing more compassion. Be as God to the unfortunate by imitating the mercy of God.

GREGORY OF NAZIANZUS¹⁶

(d). Exodus 16:16-24 relates that God told the people to gather only what they needed daily, and to save (hoard) none till the following morning. When they disobeyed, the following morning what they had hoarded *bred worms and stank*. Yet God told them that on the sixth day they could gather a double portion so they would have enough for their needs on the Sabbath, a day of rest, when work was not allowed. On the Sabbath, that which they had saved from the day before *did not stink, nor were any worms in it*. Why? Are there present-day analogies of this incident? The message in being allowed to gather double on the sixth day in order to have enough for the seventh is that God understands our need to make reasonable provisions for the future if we obey His precepts along the way. When the Israelites disobeyed His instructions, the portion they hoarded became contaminated, rendering that which was given for their benefit potentially harmful to them.

God did not create evil. When He finished His creation He pronounced every element in it "good" (Gen 1:31). The eviction of Adam and Eve from Eden and the evils of the world they subsequently found themselves in were caused by misuse of that which was good. Modern examples of this abound:

-God created the grape from which man learned to make wine. Jesus' first miracle involved turning water into wine for the enjoyment of the guests at a wedding in Cana (Jn 2). More importantly, it was a pre-figuration of the wine which became His Blood at the Mystical Supper (Mt 26:27-28). Therefore, wine is used in the Sacrament of Eucharist, during which it becomes the Blood of Christ and is received by those who love Him, "for remission of sins and life everlasting." Yet some abuse the use of wine, and this abuse can lead to sin and destruction. The grape which God created is good, and wine made from the grape is used in the Church for the continuation of that which is good, but through improper use of wine, man can bring about evil.

-God instructed man to unite with woman to form a family and to multiply and fill the earth (Gen 1:27-28, 2:21-24). Within this framework, sexual union is good—a wondrous gift from God to be enjoyed within marriage. Yet some use this gift in ways He has warned us not to

—for our own well being. The shattered lives, abuses and diseases which often result are the consequences of misuse of one of God's most powerful gifts.

Whether in regard to sexual behavior, lifestyles or spirituality, God's laws were given to set His people apart, to demonstrate that they are different than the rest of the world; to give them a way to show obedience through guidelines which, of their own free will, they must choose to obey or disobey; and to produce a better, healthier way of life on earth, with the fullness of God's Kingdom as the goal.

You have tasted the fruit of disobedience. You have learned how bitter the food of that bitter counselor. Taste now the food of obedience, which keeps evil away; and then you will learn that it is sweet and profitable to obey God.

CYRIL OF ALEXANDRIA¹⁷

(e). Is the spiritual value of almsgiving negated if the money we give is misused? After basic criteria are satisfied with regard to giving wisely, to those who can be trusted, those who give should not allow doubts to hamper their generosity. God honors the intentions of the giver, even if the funds are ultimately misused.

(f). Why is almsgiving considered proof of love and faith? Jesus said, *Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also* (Mt 6:21). It is easy to see what means most to a person by the allocation of his or her time, talent and treasure. Those who really love God give of their treasure so that His work will be done and His people cared for.

Trials are of two kinds. Either affliction will test our souls as gold is tried in a furnace and make trial of us through patience, or the very prosperity of our lives will oftentimes, for many, be itself an occasion of trial and temptation. For it is equally difficult to keep the soul upright and undefeated in the midst of afflictions as to keep oneself from insolence and pride in prosperity.

BASIL¹⁸

Let us think with shame of the great benefits we have already received and the great benefits we are yet to receive. If a poor man comes to us and begs, let us receive him with much good will: comforting him, encouraging him, so that we may be treated likewise, both by God and our fellowmen (Mt 7:12).

CHRYSOSTOM¹⁹

¹ Schaff, "Homily XVI," Vol. XII, p.357.

² *ibid*, p.356.

³ Toal, "I Will Pull Down My Barns," Vol. Three, p.327.

⁴ Schaff, "Homily XVII," p.360.

⁵ Toal, "Christian Moderation," Vol. One, p.400.

⁶ Schaff, "Homily XIX," p.371.

⁷ *ibid*, "Homily XVII," p.361.

⁸ *ibid*.

⁹ *ibid*, "Homily XVI" p.358.

¹⁰ Toal, "Steps of the Ascent to Blessedness," Vol. Four, p.480.

¹¹ Winter, "Enjoying our Possessions," (Day 21).

¹² Luibheid and Russell, "Step 2," (On Detachment), *Ladder*, p.82.

¹³ *ibid*.

¹⁴ Schaff, "Homily XVII," p.361.

¹⁵ Toal, "I Will Pull Down my Barns," Vol. Three, p.327.

¹⁶ *ibid*, "On the Love of the Poor," Vol. Four, p.56.

¹⁷ *ibid*, "Meditation on the Mystical Supper," Vol. Three, p.156.

¹⁸ *ibid*, "I Will Pull Down my Barns," p.325.

¹⁹ Schaff, "Homily XVII," p.362.