

Spiritual Transformation and Giving

*A talk prepared by His Grace, Bishop Alexei of Sitka and Alaska for the 2022
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Giving to those in need as a natural expression of human altruism

Lord have mercy. There is no prayer offered more frequently in the Orthodox Church than this simple supplication. The primary divine energy, activity, or action that we pray that the Lord God will have on us and on His world is mercy, which describes perfectly how the Gospel changes our own orientation towards what we have that in turn reaches into who we are meant to be. We have what we have in order to be merciful stewards of God's own mercy towards us, acting with generosity to those in need and to the Church who needs our collaboration, our synergy. In other words, the most basic prayer of our Church is at the very root of the virtue, the way of life, the chief characteristic of the Christian that is the subject of our conference. There are many ways to speak about this virtue of being merciful and compassionate that takes flesh in merciful and compassionate behavior. The Greek term is ἐλεημοσύνη, a concept which is far too narrowly translated as almsgiving. The ending bespeaks of a frame of mind and the root of mercy itself, the olive oil base for that precious ointment generously poured forth, "that ran down upon the beard, even Aaron's beard: that went down to the skirts of his garments."¹ Thus almsgiving is what the person who is merciful does, making donations, in simplest terms giving money, that is giving the wherewithal for someone else to flourish, for a community to flourish, for a Church to flourish, which is precisely what the mercy of God does for us all. For a Christian, being compassionately merciful, supporting the mission of the Church, and making donations to those in need is not an option, but a

¹ *Psalm 133:2.*

conviction about our very identity once we have decided to take up our cross and follow Christ. From that point forth, we are to be “merciful as our heavenly father is merciful.”² And in doing so consistently in the right spirit, the believer is transformed, being purified, illumined, and even deified. All through that synergy between our mercy and God’s mercy, our effort and God’s grace, for “nothing attracts God to us so much as mercy.”³

Being merciful, giving alms, supporting the mission of the faithful is part of the process of a Christian becoming Christ-like, but it has never been the exclusive property of Christianity. Some of the most magnificent moments of human kindness in history are comprised of examples of what psychologists describe as “costly behavior,... action aimed at benefiting others that involves some cost to the agent.”⁴ A biblical example is that of the centurion who was not a Jew, but who was known for his virtue, “for loving our nation and building us a synagogue,”⁵ using his money to show mercy and in turn receiving mercy from our Lord through the healing of his servant. Philanthropists like that blessed centurion can be found in every place and in every age, which means that giving to others in need or to worthy institutions is already part of human behavior recognized by all as praiseworthy. If anyone needs to be convinced of this, Saint John Chrysostom suggests posing a question regarding who is more beneficial to humanity, someone who speaks well or someone who gives to their fellow man.⁶ The answer is nearly self-evident: being a merciful and compassionate steward in deed is far more valuable than being a skilled orator with speech, as actions speak louder than words.

² *Luke 6:36.*

³ John Chrysostom *Ἐπίτομη εἰς τὴν πρὸς Τιμόθεον Δεύτερον* 6.3 (PG 62.634).

⁴ Ayelet Gneezy, Alex Imas, Amber Brown, Leif Nelson, and Michael Norton (January 2012): “Paying to be Nice: consistency and Costly Prosocial Behavior,” *Management Science* vol 58, 1, 179-187.

⁵ *Luke 7:5.*

⁶ See John Chrysostom *Ἐπίτομη εἰς τὸ κατὰ Ματθαίον* 52.4 (PG 58.523).

In theological terms, we can understand this tendency to give as an expression of the *logoi spermatikoi*⁷ present throughout creation or as part of the natural law or as basic strokes of the image of God still shining through humanity. We shall see, however, that Christian giving has its own fragrance, its own grace, and its own role that shapes the entire person in ways far deeper and far richer than generosity without the specific intentionality that comes from the entrance of the Godman, our Lord, into our world.

Economists, sociologists, and psychologists may argue about whether generosity, falling under the larger umbrella term of altruism, is really selfless or is instead selfish and self-serving, but there can be no dispute that it exists in many forms and to many degrees. Obviously, self-serving donations, gifts, and offerings are not in keeping with the Gospel of Christ and fail to transform the giver who is so centered on self that his vision is not really widened by the presence of the other. Our Lord referred to this self-serving giving when he instructed the faithful to “take heed that ye do not do your alms before men to be seen.”⁸ This type of giving is not virtuous and does not lead to the Kingdom of heaven. Even in a secular setting, such giving is not without reproach.

Through the lens of contemporary psychological literature, people become genuinely generous and altruistic, when they make moral values a priority over self-oriented values and act accordingly.⁹ This entails desiring to be better persons who open their hearts to others. The morally oriented individual finds the altruistic to be admirable and wants to be like them by forging a similar moral identity.¹⁰ In such

⁷ Justin Martyr *Απολογία Δευτέρα* 8 (PG 6.457b).

⁸ *Matthew* 6:1.

⁹ Hyemin Han, Jeongmin Kim, Changwoo Jeong and Geoffrey L. Cohen (March 7, 2017), “Attainable and Relevant Moral Exemplars Are More Effective than Extraordinary Exemplars in Promoting Voluntary Service Engagement,” *Frontiers in Psychology*.

¹⁰ Wan Ding, Yanhong Shao, Binghai Sun, Ruiibo Xie, Weijian Li and Xiaozhen Wang, (May 28, 2018), “How Can Prosocial Behavior Be Motivated? The Different Roles of Moral Judgment, Moral Elevation, and Moral Identity Among the Young Chinese,” *Frontiers in Psychology*.

individuals, the values of honesty, compassion, fairness and generosity are central to their self-understanding.¹¹ To remain consistent, individuals with a strong moral identity make sure their actions are consistent with that their self-understanding, which in turn strengthen and reinforce that moral understanding of self.¹² For psychologists and fathers alike, when hypocrisy is present, virtuous, moral giving is necessarily absent.

Giving to those in need is admirable and beautiful

In turning from the human generosity and compassion that are found outside the Church to the kind of generosity and compassion described in the Gospel and patristic literature, we are turning from morality-based human behavior to a theanthropic way of life. When the believers donate their time, their talents, and their treasures to God and to the poor in a way that is divinely-human, they are first of all looking at others and at the world through Christ-like compassion and then are allowing the grace of that compassion to move them to action that in turn further attracts the grace of God and widens the human heart.

Saint John Chrysostom considers giving to those in need to be a (1) virtue higher than all the virtues, which means that it more perfectly encompasses and defines a person's moral character that has the power to shape that character into the likeness to God than other virtues do. In a society in which asceticism was highly revered, Saint Chrysostom was quick to point out that giving to those in need is higher than virginity,¹³ fasting, and other feats of (2) asceticism. Giving as a virtue is greater than other individual expressions of piety, because the benefits extend to

¹¹ Steven G. Hertz and Tobias Krettenauer (2016), "Does Moral Identity Effectively Predict Moral Behavior?: A Meta-Analysis," *Review of General Psychology* 2016, Vol. 20, No. 2, 129–140.

¹² Americus Reed, Karl Aquino & Eric Levy (2007): Moral Identity and Judgments of Charitable Behaviors, *Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 71, 178-193, page 180.

¹³ See John Chrysostom *Υπόμνημα εἰς τὸ κατὰ Ματθαίου* 46.4 (PG 58.480).

many, rather than being confined to one person,¹⁴ which means the virtue of almsgiving helps the person become less self-centered and consequently mentally concerned with others, temperamentally loving towards them, and behaviorally moved to help them. It is also greater than any other virtue, because it is at the very heart of the Christian way of life. According to the Fathers, almsgiving is “the mother of love, of that love which is the characteristic of Christianity.”¹⁵

In like manner, giving to the Church and giving to others are even greater than (3) working miracles or raising the dead, for in giving, one is doing good to Christ, but in working miracles or raising the dead, Christ is doing good to us. Put otherwise, when God works a miracle for us we are indebted to God, but in giving what we have for others, God is indebted to us for carrying out His work here on earth.¹⁶ Through giving alms, Christ works in us and through us He feeds and clothes the poor.¹⁷ And work is the operative word. “My father works, and I work,”¹⁸ our Lord once said. And Christians work as did their Master showing mercy to those around them. The fathers are clear: it is not enough for the mouth not to curse, it must bless; it is not enough for the hand not to steal, it must give to those in need.¹⁹

Saint John Chrysostom considers giving to those in need to be an art (4) better than all the arts,²⁰ which means giving is a way of creating and crafting something beautiful in the soul and of the soul. In fact, he calls giving to those in need one of the expressions of the beauty of the soul that is “not the result of nature, but of a deliberate choice and underlining inclination.”²¹ It is not just good to give to the poor

¹⁴ See John Chrysostom *Υπόμνημα εἰς τὴν πρὸς Τίτον* 6.2 (PG 62.698).

¹⁵ John Chrysostom *Υπόμνημα εἰς τὴν πρὸς Τίτον* 6.2 PG (62.698).

¹⁶ See John Chrysostom *Υπόμνημα εἰς τὴν πρὸς Κορινθίους Δεύτερον* 16 (PG 61.516).

¹⁷ See Leo the Great *Sermones* 19.3 (PL 54.188ab).

¹⁸ *John* 5:17.

¹⁹ See John Chrysostom *Υπόμνημα εἰς τὸ κατὰ Ρωμαίους* 20.1 (PG 60.595).

²⁰ See John Chrysostom *Υπόμνημα εἰς τὸ κατὰ Ματθαίον* 52.3 (PG 58.522).

²¹ John Chrysostom *Ὀμιλία ἔξω εὐρεθεῖς Εὐτρόπιος* 17 (PG 52.414): “Τί οὖν ἔστι κάλλος ψυχῆς; Temperance, mildness, almsgiving, love, brotherly kindness, tender affection, obedience to God, the fulfillment of the law, righteousness, contrition of heart. These things are the beauty of the soul. These things then are not the results of nature, but of moral disposition. (Ταῦτα τοίνυν οὐκ ἔστι φύσεως, ἀλλὰ προαιρέσεως).

and to support the Church, it is also beautiful. Part of this beauty is intrinsic to almsgiving as a craft or art in which something beautiful is fashioned, beautiful like the cosmos itself. Giving to those in need is not simply good, it is beautiful, beautiful in terms of connection to another and beautiful in terms of the value for which treasures are sacrificed.²² The beauty of an inspiring act of charity makes a claim on us personally. We are humbled by its presence that calls us to set aside all posturing,²³ to renounce all narcissism,²⁴ and to surrender ourselves to it.²⁵ A moral act of beauty “lifts us out of everyday life and provides us with an occasion for transcendence.”²⁶

Giving to those in Need is central to the Christian life

If giving to those in need, giving to the Church, or showing mercy is a spiritual activity, a kind of asceticism greater than other ascetic feats, if it is greater than the working of miracles, if it is the art of arts fashioning the very beauty of the soul, it is not possible to speak about the Christian life and not include this aspect of Christian living in our discourse. The healthy life in Christ involves an ordered relationship of the believer with self, God, and neighbor that is achieved primarily by three activities that define the Christian life: fasting, prayer, and alms.²⁷ We show the proper love for self by disciplining ourselves with abstinence and fasting. We show the proper love for God by conversing with Him. And we show the proper love for our neighbor by sharing what we have by almsgiving. Fasting, prayer, and alms are also the chief virtues with which the believer can overcome the chief passions of

²² Neeli Bendapudi, Surendra N. Singh and Venkat Bendapudi (Jul., 1996): “Enhancing Helping Behavior: An Integrative Framework for Promotion Planning,” *Journal of Marketing*, vol. 60, No. 3, 33-49.

²³ Martin Schmidt, “Beauty, Ugliness and the Sublime,” *Journal of Analytical Psychology*, 64 (2019), 88.

²⁴ Roger Scruton, *Beauty: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 145-146.

²⁵ George Hagman, “The Sense of Beauty,” *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 83 (2002), 669-670.

²⁶ Hagman, 669.

²⁷ See Leo the Great *Sermones* 12.4 (PL 54.171cd).

gluttony, vainglory, and avarice respectively.²⁸ By fasting, lust is extinguished, by prayer God is propitiated, and by alms our own debts are forgiven.²⁹ In terms of the aspects of the Christian life, fasting strengthens purity, prayer strengthens faith, and almsgiving strengthens kindness.³⁰ If one were to remove any of these aspects of the Christian life, fasting, prayer, and alms, one is left with a caricature of Christianity that is no longer salvific.

Together, however, these three spiritual practices and orientations mutually support and strengthen each other. Some fathers consider prayer and alms to be the two wings that enable fasting to be profitable.³¹ Others consider alms and fasting as the two wings that help prayer fly to God,³² causing those prayers to ascend more quickly.³³ Regardless of whether alms help fasting or alms help prayer, one thing, according to the father, is certain: without alms, prayer is weak;³⁴ with alms, prayer is greatly assisted.³⁵ What matters most in prayer is not how many prostrations we have made or how long we have prayed, as important as these factors are. What matters are our works of love towards others that support those prayers.³⁶ In particular, giving alms increases both the faith in the heart and our confidence in God's presence,³⁷ which in turn make it more likely for our prayers to be heard.³⁸ Alms are in fact a prayer that "calls to the secret ears of God"³⁹ and a way to meditate upon the law of God.⁴⁰ And so a robust spiritual life is dependent on the quality of

²⁸ See Anom. *Opus Imperfectum in Matthaem* 15.1 (PG 56.715).

²⁹ See Leo the Great *Sermones* 12.4 (PL 54.171d).

³⁰ See Leo the Great *Sermones* 12.4 (PL 54.172).

³¹ See Severian of Gabala *Εἰς τὴν πρώτην ἡμέρα της κοσμοποιίας* 4.10 (PG 56.470).

³² See Augustine *Enarrationes in Psalmos* 43.8 (PL 36.482).

³³ See Leo the Great *Sermones* 16.2 (PL 54.177).

³⁴ See Anom. *Opus Imperfectum in Matthaem* 2 (PG 56.642-643).

³⁵ See Augustine *Epistolae* 130.24 (PL 33.503).

³⁶ See John Chrysostom *Ἐπόμνημα εἰς τὴν πρὸς Τιμόθεον Δεύτερον* 1.4 (PG 62.604).

³⁷ See Anom. *Opus Imperfectum in Matthaem* 15 (PG 56.715).

³⁸ John Cassian *Collationes* 2.21.33 (PL 49.1213-1214); Augustine *Civitate Dei* 21.27b (PL 41.747).

³⁹ See Gregory the Great *Epistolarum* 7.28 *ad Theodorum Medicum* (PL 77.883cd).

⁴⁰ See Jerome *Liber de Expositione Psalmorum* 1 (PL 26.1280c).

prayer, fasts, and alms. The more frequent the prayers, the longer the fasts, and the more liberal the alms, the more robust the spiritual life.⁴¹

Another way of looking at the Christian life is in terms of repentance. In particular the fathers outline five ways of repentance: self-reproach for sins, the forgiveness of our neighbours' sins, prayer, almsgiving, and humility.⁴² Like the various aspects of the Christian life, these ways of repenting are interrelated and mutually support one another. A Christian should repent in all five ways, turning to God through prayer, tending to self with self-reproach and humility, and loving others through forgiveness and almsgiving. It is a sign of our Lord's mercy that he carved out many roads by which a person can still reach salvation: "If you are unable to enter the kingdom by way of virginity. Enter it then by way of a single marriage. Are you not able to enter it by one marriage? Perhaps, you can do so by means of a second marriage. Are you unable to enter by the way of continence: enter then by the way of almsgiving."⁴³

Clearly, for the Fathers almsgiving is intrinsic to salvation. They go so far as to say that without humility and almsgiving, salvation is not possible.⁴⁴ Saint Cyprian of Carthage links almsgiving with the mystery of baptism as a way of intentionally putting off of the old man and intentionally putting on the New in a way that touches the entire person.⁴⁵ The fathers repeatedly make the statement that sins are pardoned, because of one's generosity. The logic is simple. As Saint Augustine put it, "You give alms. You receive alms."⁴⁶ "Almsgiving is a work of

⁴¹ See Leo the Great *Sermones* 71.1 (PL 54.387a): "*eleemosynae largiores.*"

⁴² See John Chrysostom *Προς τους λέγοντας ότι δαίμονες διοικούν* 2.5 (PG 49.262): "(1) ἀμαρτημάτων κατάγνωσις..., (2) τὸ μὴ μνησικακεῖν τοῖς ἐχθροῖς, τὸ κρατεῖν ὀργῆς, τὸ ἀφιέναι τὰ συνδουλικὰ ἀμαρτήματα (3) Εὐχή ζέουσα καὶ ἀκριβής, καὶ ἀπὸ βαθυτάτης καρδίας, (4) τὴν ἐλεημοσύνη (5) τὸ μετριάζειν δὲ καὶ ταπεινοφρονεῖν τῶν εἰρημένων πάντων..., τὴν ταπεινοφροσύνην."

⁴³ John Chrysostom *Ομιλία ἐξω εὐρεθείς Εὐτρόπιος* 15 (PG 52.40).

⁴⁴ See John Chrysostom *Ἐπόμνημα εἰς τὸ κατὰ Ματθαῖο* 47.4 (PG 57.485).

⁴⁵ See Cyprian of Carthage *De Opere et Eleemosynis* 2 (PL 4.603); See also Leo the Great *Sermones* 49.6 (PL 54.305).

⁴⁶ Augustine *Sermones* 376.4 (PL 39.1671a).

love, and we know that ‘love covers a multitude of sins.’”⁴⁷ Elsewhere the saintly Bishop of Hippo writes, “You shall therefore go into the kingdom, not because you have not sinned, but because you have redeemed your sins by alms.”⁴⁸ Saint John Chrysostom makes this statement repeatedly in his sermons: “Do you see failure in alms-giving is enough to cast someone into hell fire?”⁴⁹ “Give up your wealth not that others may be fed, but that you may escape punishment.”⁵⁰ He even makes the somewhat shocking statement: “let us purchase salvation through almsgiving.”⁵¹ Elsewhere, Saint John clarifies his meaning when he notes, “let us not say that the kingdom may be bought with money. It is not bought with money, but rather with an unsullied intention that may demonstrate itself by means of money.”⁵² A mercifully loving heart for our neighbor that touches our own livelihood to the point of sacrifice is how we “purchase salvation,” is how our love of self, *philautia*, is transfigured into love of our brethren, *philadelphia*, and we in turn are transfigured into the very likeness of Christ.

If giving alms is a basic path of repentance, part of a proper relationship between God, soul, and neighbor, and intrinsic to salvation, then the refusal to give is one of the many paths that lead to damnation. Salvias the Presbyter exclaims, “damnation is the punishment for riches improperly packed away.”⁵³ Those who hoard may think that they are saving their treasure, when it is in fact saved “for their own condemnation.”⁵⁴ Failure to give is cruelty to one’s own soul and a petition for God to refuse to give to the soul.⁵⁵ Failure to give to the poor or to the Church is

⁴⁷ Leo the Great *Sermones* 7.1 (PL 54.159); Clement of Rome *Προς Κορινθίους Δευτέρα* 16.4 J. Light foot and J. Harper, *The Apostolic Fathers* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1988), 51.

⁴⁸ Augustine *Sermones* 60.10 (PL 38.407).

⁴⁹ John Chrysostom *Υπόμνημα εἰς τὴν πρὸς Τιμόθεον Δεύτερον* 6.3 (PG 62.633).

⁵⁰ John Chrysostom *Υπόμνημα εἰς τὴν πρὸς Τίτον* 6.2 (PG 62.698).

⁵¹ John Chrysostom *Περὶ μετανοίας* 7.6 (PG 49.332).

⁵² John Chrysostom *Υπόμνημα εἰς τὴν πρὸς τοὺς Φιλιππίους* 15.3 (PG 62.291).

⁵³ Salvian the Presbyter *Adversus Avaritiam* 1.8 (PL 53.183c).

⁵⁴ Bede *Super Divi Jacobi Epistolam* 5 (PL 93.36c).

⁵⁵ See Augustine *Sermones* 87.9 (PL 38.536).

contempt for the poor, contempt for the Church,⁵⁶ and ultimately indifference towards God, denying His teachings in action, regardless of what is professed in words.⁵⁷ When people do not give to those in need, the wealth they possess ends up consuming them and corrupting them.⁵⁸ Their hands become withered with respect to doing the good.⁵⁹

Why is it so hard to give

So, giving to those in need, giving to the Church, giving alms is a beautiful art, intrinsic to the Christian life, part and parcel to salvation, while the failure to do so is directly related to damnation. From what we have just discussed, Christians should automatically and naturally be giving people. And yet, the plethora of patristic homilies on this subject indicate that the decision to embark on the spiritually transformational voyage of imitating our Savior's giving, compassionate, and sacrificial example has required encouragement for many. Hence, the fathers nudge the faithful by identifying the deceitful desires and wrong beliefs that make it hard to give and then encourage godly desires and right beliefs that transform the soul. From a psychological point of view, the root problem is egocentrism, from the perspective of the fathers it is sickly self-love, *philautia*, generating a hosts of passions, resulting in a multitude of sins.

In psycho-economic terms, the cost to the agent or the sacrifice of what is valued is the stumbling block. People in general and Christians in particular want to do what is good and right for social or moral reasons, but they often are not willing to pay the costs associated with doing good.⁶⁰ Although it may seem cynical, some

⁵⁶ See Jerome *In Malachiam Prophetam ad Minervium et Alexandrum* (PL 25.156b).

⁵⁷ See Gaudentius of Brescia *Sermones* 13.29–32 (PL 20.941b).

⁵⁸ See John Chrysostom *Υπόμνημα εἰς τὸ κατὰ Ματθαῖο 47.4* (PG 58.485).

⁵⁹ See John Chrysostom *Υπομνήμα εἰς τοὺς πρὸς Ἑβραίους 25.3* (PG 63.176).

⁶⁰ Sonya Sachdeva, Rumen Iliev, and Douglas L. Medin (2009) "Sinning Saints and Saintly Sinners The Paradox of Moral Self-Regulation," *A Journal of the Association for Psychological Science*, vol. 20, number 4.

psychologists suggest that people are more motivated by moral hypocrisy than moral integrity, desiring to appear moral and to maintain a moral view of themselves without acting morally and incurring the costs for doing so.⁶¹ This weighing of the costs is why people may not help or only give token help to those in need.⁶² In terms of economic utility, giving to charity, the Church or the poor, decreases one's reserves and decreases the usefulness of one's funds.

Social and inter-relational factors that in the right configuration and intensity can encourage people to be giving, in the wrong order and strength can do the very opposite. If people feel manipulated or forced into doing the right thing, they will likely react poorly to such a request and begin to justify not giving by minimizing the need.⁶³ Sometimes, people doubt whether they can live up to their own moral standards, doubting whether they have sufficient moral self-efficacy to follow model behavior.⁶⁴ And so doubting that they can give, say, ten percent of their income to the Church or to charity, they end up not giving at all. Even worse, they may become resentful for being asked to give, because their inability or unwillingness to give makes them feel in some feel inferior or judged by the more generous.⁶⁵

According to the fathers, the presence of an interrelated web of passions and especially fear are what prevents people from heeding the call and obeying Christ's command to be merciful. For the Fathers, giving alms is difficult for some people, because of their desire for money, even though that desire is considered unnatural as money is not directly related to satisfying a natural need.⁶⁶ The desire to accumulate

⁶¹ Hertz and Krettenauer, 129–140.

⁶² Bendapudi, Singh and Bendapudi 33-49.

⁶³ Bendapudi, Singh and Bendapudi, 33-49.

⁶⁴ Rullo, Lalot and Heering, 2.

⁶⁵ Benoît Monin (2007), "Holier Than Me? Threatening Social Comparison In The Moral Domain," *Presses universitaires de Grenoble* 20 (1), 53-68.

⁶⁶ See John Chrysostom *Ἐπόμνημα εἰς τὴν πρὸς Τιμόθεον Δεύτερον* 6.3 (PG 62.633).

wealth is itself caused by vainglory and extreme laziness.⁶⁷ Having a large reserve of money can make people feel good about themselves, feel secure, and feel as though they need not work, and thus tacitly saying to themselves, in the words of the foolish rich man in our Lord’s parable, “Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years; take thine ease, eat, drink, and be merry.”⁶⁸

In addition to the presence of the passions, an absence of faith leads people to make wrong appraisals concerning the value of giving to those in need and thus they decide against giving. Saint John Cassian says the root of the problem is faithless anxiety compounded by grudging hesitation.⁶⁹ Those who decide not to give to the needy or to the Church are unable to believe that they are *really* feeding Christ and that Christ will *really* take care of them.⁷⁰ They do not believe that giving alms is very much like a farmer planting seeds.⁷¹ Being of little faith, people think about the expenditure, but not the yield.⁷² Being of little faith, they think about themselves, but not about God.⁷³ They justify their lack of charity by claiming that Christ’s commandments are impossible, not from a lack of blessed examples, but from their own mistaken belief that they could not possibly fulfill them.⁷⁴ In other words, those not inclined to be generous to people and institutions in need, let themselves give into fears about family property, but not fears about salvation;⁷⁵ fears about

⁶⁷ See John Chrysostom *Υπόμνημα εἰς τὸ κατὰ Ἰωάννην* 74.3 (PG 59.403): “Ἀπὸ κενοδοξίας καὶ ῥαθυμίας ἐσχάτης.”

⁶⁸ *Luke* 12:19.

⁶⁹ See Saint John Cassian, *Collationes* 21.33 (PL 49.1213): “For no faithless anxiety (*infidelis servandi*) for getting food will annoy him who piously distributes and disperses his wealth already consecrated to Christ and no longer regarded as his own; nor will any grudging hesitation (*moesta cunctatio*) take away from the cheerfulness of his almsgiving (*eleemosynae hilaritatem*).”

⁷⁰ See Cyprian of Carthage *De Opere et Eleemosynis* 12 (PL 4.633bc).

⁷¹ See Severian of Gabala *Εἰς τὴν πρώτην ἡμέρα της κοσμοποιίας* 4 (PG 56.471a).

⁷² See Severian of Gabala *Εἰς τὴν πρώτην ἡμέρα της κοσμοποιίας* 4 (PG 56.470d-471a).

⁷³ See John Chrysostom *Εἰς τοὺς Ἀνδριάντας* 15.16 (PG 49.162): “Ἐζημιώθης χρήματα; εὐχαρίστησον, καὶ μὴ τὴν ὁδύνην τὴν ἀπὸ τῆς ζημίας ἴδης μόνον, ἀλλὰ καὶ τὸ κέρδος τὸ ἀπὸ τῆς εὐχαριστίας.”

⁷⁴ See John Chrysostom *Υπόμνημα εἰς τὸ κατὰ Ματθαίους* 21.5 (PG 57.297); John Chrysostom *Υπόμνημα εἰς τὴν πρὸς Κορινθίους Δεύτερον* 20.1 (PG 61.537).

⁷⁵ See Cyprian of Carthage *De Opere et Eleemosynis* 10 (PL 4.632c).

providing for their children materially, but not about providing for them spiritually.⁷⁶ There is a fear of the near and uncertain future, perhaps a recession or depression (to use the very soft contemporary equivalent of a famine), but not the hypothetically distance future of the hour of death.⁷⁷ The Christian forgets scripture, “He that giveth unto the poor shall never lack.”⁷⁸ Faith is indeed the measure of all things, how much a person prays, how much a person fasts, and how much a person gives to others is a reflection of how much a person believes in Christ and that His word is true.

How to learn to be more giving: general principles and specific aids

One would think that simply pointing out that giving is a divinely beautiful part of repentance, necessary for salvation, and an expression of faith would be encouragement enough for a person to give. And in fact, when faith is strong, the desire to repent and be with Christ is fiery, everything in the Christian life falls into place, including the sacrificial giving and merciful heart that adorns the character of every Saint. But fear, uncertainty, and being of little faith cannot just be wished away. Believers also need help to be led up to the perfection to which the Gospel calls us all.

One place to begin is mindfulness of the perfection of the Kingdom of heaven that Christians strive to inherit and nonjudgmental loving-kindness to others that Christians are called upon to cultivate. First of all, when someone is making the rational decision about giving, the ideal or perfect state for the life of the poor, the ideal state for the beauty of a temple, the ideal state for a Church program must become a longed-for, much desired goal. In contrasting that goal with the present condition of the poor or the Church, the gift of being a coworker and of bringing

⁷⁶ See Gaudentius of Brescia *Sermones* 13 (PL 20.941d).

⁷⁷ See Gaudentius of Brescia *Sermones* 13 (PL20.939ab).

⁷⁸ *Proverbs* 28: 27, quoted by Cyprian of Carthage *De Opere et Eleemosynis* 9 (PL 4.631d-632a).

those in need closer in some way to heaven, should inspire a desire to give. This is verified by psychological research that finds that when an individual is distressed by the distance between the beneficiary's current state of well-being and the ideal state, the person will naturally be more predisposed to give.⁷⁹

It is good for people to realize that judgments about whether someone is to blame for being needy or truly deserving are misguided considerations that can make us distance ourselves from our brothers and sisters⁸⁰ causing us to forget that “all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God.”⁸¹ Instead, we need to have empathy for the person or institution that is in need of help,⁸² to realize and emphasize our fundamental similarity with them, apart from any external differences.⁸³ And above all, we need to look at concrete people and groups of people even as our Lord did in the Gospel, rather than at abstractions.⁸⁴

Giving to those in need obviously has value for the recipients. What the Christian who struggles with the prospect of giving his hard-earned resources to others requires is some education. Christians need to understand the value almsgiving has for them personally as an art producing something beautiful in their own soul. They likewise need to understand the danger and harm that follows from hoarding one's possessions and coveting the goods of others.⁸⁵ Then, they need to have the will to give alms,⁸⁶ which is also the desire for their will to align with their Father in heaven who sends the rain of His mercy on the just and the unjust.⁸⁷ The will itself can be strengthened in many ways, most importantly by a Christian way

⁷⁹ Bendapudi, Singh and Bendapudi, 33-49.

⁸⁰ Bendapudi, Singh and Bendapudi, 33-49.

⁸¹ *Romans* 3:23.

⁸² Wendy Liu (October 2008), “The Happiness of Giving: The Time-Ask Effect,” *Journal of Consumer Research*. DOI: 10.2139/ssrn.1292548.

⁸³ Bendapudi, Singh and Bendapudi, 33-49.

⁸⁴ Han, Kim, et al. “Attainable and Relevant Moral Exemplars Are More Effective than Extraordinary Exemplars in Promoting Voluntary Service Engagement.”

⁸⁵ See John Chrysostom *Ἐπόμνημα εἰς τὸ κατὰ Ματθαῖο 21.4* (PG 57.297).

⁸⁶ See John Chrysostom *Ἐπόμνημα εἰς τὴν πρὸς Κορινθίους Δεύτερον 20.1* (PG 61.537).

⁸⁷ *Matthew* 5:45.

of life that is all-embracing in the pursuit of the virtues and in the practice of the ascetic discipline proscribed by the Church. The other virtues support the will to give alms. When the fruits of the Spirit are present—“love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance”⁸⁸—, the law of self breaks down and the will to care for others becomes active. In like manner, the ascetic disciplines of prayer and fasting naturally help as they decrease a person’s wants making that person less covetous and thus more disposed for almsgiving.⁸⁹ Once the will to give alms grows stronger, exercising that free choice is intrinsically satisfying. Studies have even shown that making a free choice increases activity in brain regions associated with processing rewards.⁹⁰

And of course, the will is strengthened by faith in Christ’s words that “are more sure than sight,”⁹¹ faith that “takes no thought, saying, What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink? or, Wherewithal shall we be clothed?”⁹² faith that thinks more of treasure in heaven than on earth, faith that thinks more of God, then of self. Once trust in God is present in the heart,⁹³ once the fear of God is rooted in the soul, there will be not only the will to give, but a divine zeal around giving.⁹⁴ The teachings of the fathers are clear: when the knowledge of God is secure and unshakeable, then prayer, almsgiving, and righteous behavior become a way of life.⁹⁵

Given that reading increases awareness, strengthens faith,⁹⁶ steadies a wandering mind,⁹⁷ gives rise to pious thoughts,⁹⁸ illumines the heart, and guides

⁸⁸ *Galatians* 5:22-23.

⁸⁹ John Chrysostom *Ἐπίτομη εἰς τὸ κατὰ Ματθαῖο* 58.4 (PG 58.563).

⁹⁰ William T. Harbaugh, Ulrich Mayr, and Daniel R. Burghart, “Neural Responses to Taxation and Voluntary Giving Reveal Motives for Charitable Donations.” *Science*, 316 (5831), 1624.

⁹¹ See John Chrysostom *Ἐπίτομη εἰς τὸ κατὰ Ματθαῖον* 88.3 (PG 58.777-779).

⁹² *Matthew* 6:31.

⁹³ See Augustine *Sermones* 66.5 (PL 38.433a).

⁹⁴ See John Chrysostom *Εἰς τοὺς Ἀνδριάντας* 15.2 (PG 49.154).

⁹⁵ See Severian of Gabala *Εἰς τὴν πρώτην ἡμέραν τῆς κοσμοποιίας* 4.10 (PG 56.470).

⁹⁶ See Paulinus and Therasia *Epistolam ad Augustinam* 1.25 (PL 33.101).

⁹⁷ See Maximus the Confessor *Ἐπιστολή Κωνσταντίνω* 24 (PG 91.609d-612a).

⁹⁸ See John Cassian *Collationes* 1.1.14 (PL 49.508a).

believers to virtuous behavior,⁹⁹ the fathers suggest meditating on scriptural passages that will encourage the believer to become a giving and generous person. After all, Saint Athanasius the Great noted that constant rumination on the law of the Lord is a necessary form of spiritual exercise that should be practiced regularly, so that good thoughts might lead a person to acts of virtue.¹⁰⁰ And so, the fathers recommend meditation on the many scriptural passages related to giving to those in need, which Saint John Chrysostom refers to as the “laws in the New Testament and the Old Testament set down about almsgiving.”¹⁰¹

The latin-speaking Church fathers such as Saints Jerome, Cyprian of Carthage, Valerian, and Gregory the Great would select important passages worthy of meditation in their homilies and letters encouraging the faithful to give alms. From the Gospel, they would suggest reflecting on our Lord’s words: “Blessed are the merciful for they shall obtain mercy (*Matthew 5:7*)” “make to yourselves friends of the mammon of unrighteousness that ... they may receive you into everlasting habitations (*Luke 16:9*);” and “give alms ... and behold all things are clean unto you (*Luke 11:41*).”¹⁰² From the epistles of Saint Paul, they would stress the verse: “Let your abundance supply their want, that their abundance also may be a supply to your want (*2 Corinthians 8:14*).”¹⁰³

But especially common in patristic writings would be exhortations to meditate upon two works from the wisdom literature: the *Book of Sirach* and the *Book of Tobit*. Thus, they would advise reflecting on *Sirach 4:11*: “Do something good for yourself; give alms to the poor,”¹⁰⁴ or *Sirach 3:30*: “Water will quench a flaming fire; and

⁹⁹ See John Climacus *Κλίμαξ* 27 (PG 88.1116cd). See also John of Damascus *Εκδόσις Ακριβής της Ορθοδόξου Πίστεως* 4.17 (PG 94.1176c).

¹⁰⁰ See Athanasius *Επιστολή* 11.7 (PG 26.1408a).

¹⁰¹ John Chrysostom *Υπόμνημα εἰς τὸ κατὰ Ματθαῖο* 50.4 (PG 58.510).

¹⁰² Jerome *Epistola ad Eustochium* 108.15 (PL 22.892).

¹⁰³ Gregory the Great *Epistola ad Theodore Medicum* (PL 77.884ab).

¹⁰⁴ Valerian of Cimiez *Sermones* 8.3 (PL 52.718a).

alms maketh an atonement for sins.”¹⁰⁵ From the *Book of Tobit*, the fathers would recall first Tobias’s instruction to his son on godliness in *Tobit* 4:7-8: “Give alms of thy substance, and turn not thy face from any poor man: so shall it come to pass that the face of God shall not be turned from thee.”¹⁰⁶ And then they would turn to the exhortation by the Archangel Raphael in *Tobit* 12:8-9: “Prayer is good with fasting and alms and righteousness. A little with righteousness is better than much with unrighteousness. It is better to give alms than to lay up gold: For alms doth deliver from death, and shall purge away all sin. Those that exercise alms and righteousness shall be filled with life.”¹⁰⁷ It is significant that the fathers turn to wisdom literature in seeking encouragement to give alms. In the context of the wisdom tradition, giving to others and supporting communities is part of a path grounded in tradition, founded on the fear of God, and leading to life, peace, and flourishing. To give of one’s treasures to others and to God is to be wise.¹⁰⁸ And this itself should encourage believers to give.

Along side of these scriptural passages to encourage almsgiving, the fathers also recommend the remembrance of death,¹⁰⁹ which has long been a tool of ascetics to maintain their ascetic discipline¹¹⁰ and a means to repel the suggestions of the evil one to not give to those in need.¹¹¹ In this case, the hour of death reminds the believer that soon everything he possesses will no longer be his, thus encouraging putting his treasure “where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal.”¹¹²

¹⁰⁵ Jerome *Epistola ad Eustochium* 108.15 (PL 22.892).

¹⁰⁶ Leo the Great *Sermones* 10.3 (PL 54.166ab).

¹⁰⁷ Cyprian of Carthage *De Opere et Eleemosynis* 5 (PL 4.606b).

¹⁰⁸ Craig Bartholomew and Ryan’s O’Dowd, *Old Testament Wisdom Literature* (IVP Academic: Downer’s Grove Illinois, 2011), 19-30.

¹⁰⁹ Paschasius of Dumium *Sententiae* (PL 74.393bc).

¹¹⁰ See John Climacus *Κλίμαξ* 6 (PG 88.796c).

¹¹¹ See Gregory Palamas *Ὁμιλίου* 12 (PG 151.153c).

¹¹² *Matthew* 6:19.

Sometimes, the Holy Fathers would also encourage Christians to give more by looking at the precedent of the Mosaic law that was not abrogated and that is considered less demanding than the perfection of the Gospel. This makes a lot of psychological sense. Helping behavior is automatically reinforced when people see it as normative, what should be done¹¹³ and also as achievable, what can be done.¹¹⁴ From the onset, Christians would not view the example from Jewish behavior as being significantly different or extremely better than their own behavior,¹¹⁵ which in turn would increase the likelihood to imitate such attainable, in extraordinary moral behavior.¹¹⁶ In Deuteronomy, the law states that the faithful children of Israel must not appear before the Lord for prayer empty-handed,¹¹⁷ which means praying without having given alms is a sin that transgresses that law.¹¹⁸ As the Jews were able to keep this rule of always bringing a gift or offering when they would come to pray, so Christians can certainly do the same.

The fathers would also encourage generosity by pointing to the practice of tithing, but eventually stretching the boundaries of tithing to reach the sacrificial giving associated with Christian perfection. Thus, Saint John Chrysostom advised that when a craftsman “sells any article of his trade, let him give the first-fruits of its price unto God: let him cast in a small portion here, and assign something to God out of his portion, though it be rather scanty... recommending a deposit of not less than a tenth part,” adding “let it be a law for all who gather their incomes in an honest way.”¹¹⁹ The Lord did not abrogate the tithe, even in matters as small as a tithe of

¹¹³ Bendapudi, Singh and Bendapudi, 33-49.

¹¹⁴ Benoît Monin (2007), “Holier Than Me? Threatening Social Comparison In The Moral Domain,” *Presses universitaires de Grenoble* 20 (1), 53-68.

¹¹⁵ Hyemin Han, Jeongmin Kim, Changwoo Jeong and Geoffrey L. Cohen (March 7, 2017), “Attainable and Relevant Moral Exemplars Are More Effective than Extraordinary Exemplars in Promoting Voluntary Service Engagement,” *Frontiers in Psychology*.

¹¹⁶ Rullo, Lalot and Heering, 2.

¹¹⁷ *Deuteronomy* 16:16.

¹¹⁸ See Anom. *Opus Imperfectum in Matthaem* 15 (PG 56.715).

¹¹⁹ See John Chrysostom *Ἐπόμνημα εἰς τὴν πρὸς Κορινθίους Πρώτον* 43.3 (PG 61.372-374).

seasonings and herbs, but also did not yet consider it mercy or an act of Christian giving.¹²⁰ The fathers further note that tithing was a given for the Jews who would give tithes upon tithes, making it disgraceful for Christians not to give at least a tenth of their earnings.¹²¹ With a careful reading of the law, Saint John Chrysostom reckoned the tithe as being not ten percent, but between thirty and fifty percent once first fruits, first born, and jubilees were considered,¹²² not including the donations for the Levites, widows, and orphans.¹²³ And of course, there have been Jews who have been generous beyond the tithe such as the widow of Zarephath “who thought more of satisfying Elijah’s hunger than of preserving her own life and that of her son.”¹²⁴ The fathers also note that the law does not bring the believer to perfection, but grace tears out the root of sin. So tithing, though good at a human level, is as far from the perfection of a Christian as an eye for an eye is distant from turning the other cheek. Christian perfection is not a tithe, but giving everything to the poor and taking up one’s cross to follow Christ.¹²⁵ And there have always been Christians who do exactly that.¹²⁶

The fathers have also found it helpful to reason about the nature and purpose of money. Saint John Chrysostom notes that money is not intrinsically valuable, but it is valuable because of our estimate of it.¹²⁷ When a person gives money to help those in need, one is using earth to conquer earth as a text attributed to the Saint once put it so beautifully, “you received earth from the earth so that you might conquer the earth through the earth.”¹²⁸ And so the fathers advise: whatever one has has been

¹²⁰ See Augustine *Sermones* 106.3 (PL 38.626).

¹²¹ John Chrysostom *Υπόμνημα εἰς τὴν πρὸς τοὺς Εφεσίους* 4.4 (PG 62.36).

¹²² See John Chrysostom *Υπόμνημα εἰς τὸ κατὰ Ματθαῖον* 64.4 (PG 58.615).

¹²³ See John Chrysostom *Υπόμνημα εἰς τὸ κατὰ Ματθαῖον* 85.3 (PG 58.760).

¹²⁴ Jerome *Epistolae* 54.16 *Ad Furiam* (PL 22.558).

¹²⁵ See John Cassian *Collationes* 2.21.33 (PL 49.1213-1214).

¹²⁶ See John Chrysostom *Υπόμνημα εἰς τὸ κατὰ Ματθαῖον* 39.4 (PG 57.438).

¹²⁷ See John Chrysostom, *Κατήχησις Δευτέρα* 3 (PG 49.237).

¹²⁸ Anom. *Opus Imperfectum in Matthaem* 15 (PG 56.719).

entrusted by God has been done so that you can be liberal with the poor.¹²⁹ Its proper use is “to loose him that is bound, not to chain her that is free.”¹³⁰ And in fact when used properly, it really becomes a possession, a permanent one, since “nothing belongs to each individual more than what has been spent on one’s neighbor.”¹³¹ The fathers even suggest that the Christian should work not so much to make a living as to have the wherewithal to make an offering to those in need.¹³²

Patristic discourses are rich in commentary on what it means to give to Christ in giving to the least of his brethren.¹³³ They urge the believer to understand a request for help by the Church or the poor as Christ the King asking something from the believer even though he or she is poor, the King’s willingness to come to the believer and ask has made the believer incomparably richer. Understood from this vantage point, it is an honor and privilege to give.¹³⁴ The fathers also refer to almsgiving as lending to God and ask the believe to consider the difference between a judge who is indebted to us in contrast to approaching a judge to whom we are indebted; clearly, the judge indebted to us for our almsgiving to him will be much more lenient.¹³⁵ The fathers also suggest that when we encounter someone in need, we realize that we stand before an altar on which all can serve as priests offering a sacrifice of praise to God.¹³⁶ It is also useful to consider if we were facing death and could avoid it for a sum of money, who would not give that money to escape death. Through alms, one is buying off eternal death.¹³⁷

¹²⁹ See John Chrysostom *Υπόμνημα εἰς τὸ κατὰ Ματθαῖο 77.5* (PG 58.708).

¹³⁰ John Chrysostom *Υπόμνημα εἰς τὴν πρὸς Τιμόθεον Πρώτον 7.3* (PG 62.538).

¹³¹ Leo the Great *Sermones* 16.2 (PL 54.177b).

¹³² Bede *Expositio in Actus Apostolorum* 20.35b (PL 92.986).

¹³³ *Matthew* 25:40.

¹³⁴ See John Chrysostom *Υπόμνημα εἰς τὴν πρὸς Θεσσαλονικεῖς Πρώτον 3.6* (PG 62.415).

¹³⁵ See Cyprian of Carthage *De Opere et Eleemosynis* 16 (PL 4.638ab); John Chrysostom *Λόγος περὶ μετανοίας 7.6* (PG 49.332).

¹³⁶ See John Chrysostom *Υπόμνημα εἰς τὴν πρὸς Κορινθίους Δεύτερον 20.3* (PG 61.540).

¹³⁷ See John Chrysostom *Υπόμνημα εἰς τὴν πρὸς Τιμόθεον Δεύτερον 6.4* (PG 62.636).

Finally, the fathers note that giving makes the life of the giver and the receiver not just better, but even heavenly. The Venerable Bede would say, almsgiving “renews the recipient and makes the giver rejoice.”¹³⁸ The generous may not consider the emotional significance of giving, but giving does provide some direct increase in personal happiness.¹³⁹ Being merciful is good for the soul. It is in fact “the virtue that makes all virtues profitable.”¹⁴⁰ Even psychologists note that “prosocial behavior is an effective behavioral coping strategy.”¹⁴¹ According to the Fathers, giving in honor of the departed spiritually benefits the departed.¹⁴² Giving on behalf of loved ones who are alive spiritually benefits those loved ones.¹⁴³ And that good is not simply a temporal, this-worldly good deed. As Saint John Chrysostom notes, “in either life, it shows us glorious.”¹⁴⁴ Stretching out one’s hand to the poor on earth, one reaches the very summit of heaven where Christ the King receives the gift.¹⁴⁵ Repeatedly, the Fathers note that what is deposited in heaven, remains in heaven, as “unspeakable wealth.” The fathers are clear that the benefit of being merciful is much greater in heaven than it is on earth, for earth is but a shadow of what is to come.¹⁴⁶ But it’s not simply merits, it is the joy of having fulfilled the commandments of Christ.¹⁴⁷ For a Christian, there is the double joy of helping someone else and doing something to the glory of God.¹⁴⁸ A Christian should think about whom he can cheer up and help every day, to be a treasure, a granary for others

¹³⁸ Maximus of Turin, *The Sermons of St. Maximus of Turin* trans. by Boniface Ramsey, *Ancient Christian Writers* 50 (New York: Newman, 1989), Homily on Almsgiving 71, 175.

¹³⁹ Wendy Liu (October 2008), “The Happiness of Giving: The Time-Ask Effect,” *Journal of Consumer Research*. DOI: 10.2139/ssrn.1292548.

¹⁴⁰ Leo the Great *Sermones* 10.3 (PL 54.166ab).

¹⁴¹ Caprara, Gian Vittorio; Steca, Patrizia (March 2005); “Self-Efficacy Beliefs as Determinants of Prosocial Behavior Conducive to Life,” *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology* vol. 24, 2.

¹⁴² See Jerome *Epistola ad Pammachius* 66.5 (PL 22.641).

¹⁴³ Cyprian of Carthage *De Opere et Eleemosynis* 18 (PL 4.616a).

¹⁴⁴ John Chrysostom *Υπόμνημα εἰς τὸ κατὰ Ματθαῖο* 52.3 (PG 58.522).

¹⁴⁵ John Chrysostom *Υπόμνημα εἰς τὴν πρὸς Τιμόθεον Δεύτερον* 1.4 (PG 62.604).

¹⁴⁶ John Chrysostom *Υπόμνημα εἰς τὸ κατὰ Ματθαῖο* 23.10 PG 57.319: “ἀφάτου τοῦ τῆς ἐλεημοσύνης πλοῦτου.”

¹⁴⁷ John Chrysostom *Εἰς τοὺς Ἀνδριάντας* 16.6 PG 49.170.

¹⁴⁸ Origen *Veteris Commentariorum Origenes in Matthaeum* 77 PG 13.1725-1726.

to be helped.¹⁴⁹ And finally, there is the joy from the grace of God that can be experienced when fulfilling this basic commandment.¹⁵⁰

The Proper Way to Give

There can be no doubt that Christians are to be giving, but for giving to be transformational it must be done in the right way. Giving must be (1) unconditional. There are no conditions in which it is not appropriate to give and no time in which it is not convenient to give. Sometimes a trial, being robbed, or losing money in this way or that, makes people less inclined to give, when, according to the fathers that is when they should give more, for when a ship is about to be shipwrecked, possessions that weigh it down are better throw overboard. Acting in like manner by giving to Christ in calamity, one will have consolation from the earlier loss.¹⁵¹ This is also a way of showing thanksgiving in calamities that even further brings the grace of God.¹⁵² Giving alms as a thanksgiving whenever anything unfortunate or unpleasant happens to us is a blessed practice. Saint John invites us to try this and see how it can transform sorrow into joy.¹⁵³

In Christian stewardship, almsgiving, and giving, (2) motivation that reveals the secrets of the heart is critical. Almsgiving should never be done in order to be praised by others for one's generosity.¹⁵⁴ In psychological literature, almsgiving for the sake of praise for helping is considered egoistic in contrast with the altruistic desire to alleviate a need.¹⁵⁵ If the end is other than God or neighbor, if the end involves attaining rewards, avoiding punishments or escaping personal distress, the

¹⁴⁹ Augustine *Sermones* 376.4 PL 39.1671a.

¹⁵⁰ Augustine *Enarrationes in Psalmos* 38.24 PL 36.410a.

¹⁵¹ John Chrysostom *Υπόμνημα εἰς τὴν πρὸς Θεσσαλονικεῖς Πρώτον* 3.6 PG 62.413-415.

¹⁵² John Chrysostom *Εἰς τοὺς Ἀνδριάντας* 1.0 PG 49.29.

¹⁵³ John Chrysostom *Υπόμνημα εἰς τὴν πρὸς Θεσσαλονικεῖς Πρώτον* 3.6 (PG 62.413).

¹⁵⁴ Augustine *De sermone Domini in monte* 2.2.5 PL34.1272a.

¹⁵⁵ Bendapudi, Singh and Bendapudi, 33-49.

motivation and hence the heart is impure.¹⁵⁶ For example, giving for political gain or a tax advantage is not giving, but a transaction.¹⁵⁷ One indication that such giving is not spiritually beneficial is the finding that when tax codes make giving financially more valuable, churchgoers that in turn give more also attend church less.¹⁵⁸ In other words, they do not grow in virtue and closeness to God, but move in the very opposite direction. Giving in order to gain prestige, respect, or friendship or to avoid scorn for being miserly or simply to cave in to social pressure¹⁵⁹ are not expressions of Christian giving, but Pharisaical hypocrisy.

For the fathers, giving is not “so much for the sake of the poor as for the sake of the persons themselves who bestow.”¹⁶⁰ This can be seen in the emphasis not on the end being the benefit to the beneficiary, but on the disposition with which the giver gives. That disposition is to be (3) cheerful,¹⁶¹ so that it might be pleasing to God.¹⁶² Otherwise, the sacrifice offered is blemished.¹⁶³ Giving to the Church should never feel like paying taxes, for taxes are paid for fear of punishment, whereas giving to the Church or to others is done out of love for Christ, a love that makes one joyful.¹⁶⁴ This is why assessments and head taxes are inappropriate from a spiritual perspective. If one is sorrowful after giving, the fathers even suggest that it is better not to give at all than to do so hypocritically without faith in God or love for others.¹⁶⁵ Rather than thinking one is poorer for giving or one is doing others a favor, the giver should feel grateful and indebted to the recipient.¹⁶⁶

¹⁵⁶ Bendapudi, Singh and Bendapudi, 33-49.

¹⁵⁷ Bendapudi, Singh and Bendapudi, 33-49.

¹⁵⁸ Sachdeva, Iliev, and Medin, 4.

¹⁵⁹ James Andreoni (June 1990); “Impure Altruism and Donations to Public Goods: A Theory of Warm-Glow Giving,” *The Economic Journal*, IOO, 464.

¹⁶⁰ John Chrysostom *Υπόμνημα εἰς τὴν πρὸς Κορινθίους Πρώτον* 21.6 PG 61.179. See also, John Chrysostom *Υπόμνημα εἰς τὴν πρὸς τοὺς Φιλιππίους* 15.1 (PG 62.287).

¹⁶¹ John Chrysostom *Περὶ ἐλεημοσύνης* 10.4 (PG 51.266).

¹⁶² Jerome *Commentariorum in Amos Prophetam* 2.5 (PL 25.1019a).

¹⁶³ Basil the Great *Ὅροι κατὰ πλάτος* 29 (PG 31.992ab).

¹⁶⁴ Maximus of Turin, *The Sermons of St. Maximus of Turin*, 71, 175.

¹⁶⁵ John Chrysostom *Υπόμνημα εἰς τὴν πρὸς Κορινθίους Δεύτερον* 16.4 (PG 61.516).

¹⁶⁶ John Chrysostom *Υπόμνημα εἰς τὴν πρὸς Τιμόθεον Πρώτον* 14.2 (PG 62.574).

Giving is also best done without drawing attention to self, much like Christ sought for others not to make his miracles known.¹⁶⁷ Giving must also be (4) liberal, like the widow's mite, not "a glass of water out of the sea."¹⁶⁸ Saint Jerome even advises that alms should be such that they actually touch the capacity of the one giving to buy luxury items for himself.¹⁶⁹ Giving should also be (5) consistent, rather than a chance occurrence.¹⁷⁰ Studies indicate that consistency and liberality in giving tend to go together¹⁷¹ and over time coalesce into an important part of a person's moral identity and prosocial orientation,¹⁷² which offers some scientific corroboration for the spiritual transformation that the Christian recognizes in the heart.

When someone gives to the needy or to the Church, what matters most is not the size of the sum, but the largeness of the mind,¹⁷³ the purpose (τῆς προαιρέσεως) of the gift,¹⁷⁴ and the intention of the giver.¹⁷⁵ Someone with this mindset will not make a token gift, though the gift be a widow's mite and though the gift objectively may not be enough to alleviate the need. Christian give with the heart and leave it to God to provide the increase. Secular altruists, on the other hand, always engage in a calculus that rejects token gifts, because token gifts do not allow them to solve the problem.¹⁷⁶ Ultimately, the best example of how to give alms is to look to God who

¹⁶⁷ John Chrysostom *Υπόμνημα εἰς τὸ κατὰ Ματθαῖον* 71.3 (PG 58.666).

¹⁶⁸ John Chrysostom *Υπόμνημα εἰς τὴν πρὸς Κορινθίους Πρώτον* 21.6 (PG 61.178); John Chrysostom *Υπόμνημα εἰς τὴν πρὸς Κορινθίους Δεύτερον* 20.1 (PG 61.537).

¹⁶⁹ Jerome *Epistola 108 ad Eustochium* 108.17 (PL 22.892).

¹⁷⁰ John Chrysostom *Υπομνήματα εἰς τοὺς πρὸς Ἑβραίους* 32.3 (PG 63.224).

¹⁷¹ Gneezy, Imas, et al., 186.

¹⁷² Reed, Aquino & Levy, 180.

¹⁷³ John Chrysostom *Υπόμνημα εἰς τὸ κατὰ Ματθαῖον* 52.3 (PG 58.522): "Οὐ γὰρ τῷ μέτρῳ τῶν διδομένων ἡ ἐλεημοσύνη κρίνεται, ἀλλὰ τῇ δαυιλείᾳ τῆς γνώμης." John Chrysostom *Υπόμνημα εἰς τὴν πρὸς Κορινθίους Δεύτερον* 16.2 (PG 61.513): "Οὐ γὰρ τῷ μέτρῳ τῶν διδομένων, ἀλλὰ τῇ γνώμῃ τῶν παρεχόντων ἡ φιλοτιμία κρίνεται."

¹⁷⁴ John Chrysostom *Υπομνηματα εἰς τὰς πράξεις τῶν ἀποστόλων* 21.6 (PG 60.170).

¹⁷⁵ John Chrysostom *Υπόμνημα εἰς τὸ κατὰ Ματθαῖον* 19.1 (PG 58.274).

¹⁷⁶ Bendapudi, Singh and Bendapudi, 33-49.

is the primary teacher on how to give alms¹⁷⁷ and “who practices it without limits.”¹⁷⁸ This presupposes that the Christian not only wants to give alms, but wants to learn to do so in the most perfect way, in the most godly way.¹⁷⁹ When giving alms, the fathers suggest that it is best for the person to have no one in the heart except the person of God alone.¹⁸⁰

Given the importance of almsgiving in the Christian life, the fathers suggest turning almsgiving into a habit. Much like our hand automatically makes the sign of the cross during our prayers, so when we see someone in want or when we learn that the Church has a need, we offer what we can to help. Psychologists note that when giving becomes habitual, it makes the decision to give easier and one’s attitude towards giving stronger.¹⁸¹ The fathers well aware of this part of human psychology suggest setting up cues and times for giving. In terms of times, the best day for alms is Sunday, “the day on which we received all the blessings which we now have.”¹⁸² With respect to cues, having a specific place where alms are given is also important. As one father puts it writes, “not only in the Old Testament but also in the New it is commanded that every Christian put something into the alms box every week when he comes to pray, just as the apostle says: ‘On the first day of every week, each of you is to put something aside and store it up, as he may prosper, so that contributions need not be made when I come.’”¹⁸³ In particular, the fathers teach that we need to make an offering whenever we enter Church,¹⁸⁴ and we need to make an offering before praying in private. Thus, Saint John Chrysostom suggest having a collection box near the prayer corner, so that one makes an offering before beginning evening

¹⁷⁷ John Chrysostom *Υπόμνημα εἰς τὸ κατὰ Ματθαῖον* 52.3 (PG 58.522).

¹⁷⁸ John Chrysostom *Υπόμνημα εἰς τὸ κατὰ Ματθαῖον* 71.3 (PG 58.665).

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

¹⁸⁰ Anom. *Opus Imperfectum in Matthaem* 13.1 (PG 56.705).

¹⁸¹ Sachdeva, Iliev, and Medin, 4.

¹⁸² John Chrysostom *Υπόμνημα εἰς τὴν πρὸς Κορινθίους Πρώτον* 43.1 (PG 61.368).

¹⁸³ Anom. *Opus Imperfectum in Matthaem* 15.1 (PG 56.715). See *1 Corinthians* 16:2.

¹⁸⁴ John Chrysostom *Υπόμνημα εἰς τὴν πρὸς Τιμόθεον Δεύτερον* 6.4 (PG 62.634).

prayers. He also suggests having such a collection box near the bed, so that one might sleep with an easy conscience.¹⁸⁵

The Transformational Nature of Giving

Above all, giving to those in need, giving to the Church, is about transformation, about growing “unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ.”¹⁸⁶ When people give to those in need, when people support their communities, when people support the Church, they change. At a neurological level, brain systems associated with social attachment and affiliative reward mechanisms are activated when people are donating funds.¹⁸⁷ Along with the positive emotions associated with giving, people’s behavioral repertoires increase, their preoccupation with self decreases,¹⁸⁸ and their sense of self expands to include others.¹⁸⁹ They become people for whom communion with others is a characteristic trait of their profile.¹⁹⁰ There are also findings that people who make costly donations behave with greater honesty than those who make token donations.¹⁹¹ Helping acquaintances, donating to charity, and spending time with others, unlike purchasing costly consumer goods, are behaviors associated with happiness,¹⁹² and hence optimism, a trademark of a Christian outlook.

In an Orthodox Christian context, repentance means changing the eye of the heart and almsgiving is one of the ways that happens. In terms of a penance for sins,

¹⁸⁵ John Chrysostom *Ἐπόμνημα εἰς τὴν πρὸς Κορινθίους Πρώτον* 43.4 (PG 61.373).

¹⁸⁶ *Ephesians* 4:13.

¹⁸⁷ Jorge Moll, Frank Krueger, Roland Zahn, Matteo Pardini, Ricardo de Oliveira-Souza, and Jordan Grafman (October 17, 2006); “Human fronto–mesolimbic networks guide decisions about charitable donation,” *PNAS*, vol. 103, no. 42, 15623–15628.

¹⁸⁸ Caprara, Gian Vittorio; Steca, Patrizia (March 2005); “Self-Efficacy Beliefs as Determinants of Prosocial Behavior Conducive to Life,” *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology* vol. 24, 2.

¹⁸⁹ Freeman, Aquino, and McFerran, 74.

¹⁹⁰ Sachdeva, Iliev, and Medin, 4.

¹⁹¹ Gneezy, Imas, et al., 188.

¹⁹² Elizabeth W. Dunn, Lara B. Aknin, and Michael I. Norton; “Spending Money on Others Promotes Happiness,” *Science*, 319.

almsgiving is considered superior to fasting, which is considered superior to prayer.¹⁹³ Almsgiving is thus the particular remedy to be applied to the spiritual passions of greed¹⁹⁴ as well as that of fornication,¹⁹⁵ both of which involve taking for the sake of personal pleasure. Almsgiving also soothes wrath,¹⁹⁶ redirecting anger against someone by expressing love for someone else. But it is much more than just a remedy for those passions and a medicine for our sins.¹⁹⁷ It is an important step in overcoming the tyranny of sin, since when the believer completely rids himself of the love of possessing, sin has no more dominion over the believer.¹⁹⁸ Giving alms prepares a person to be able to stand up in the face of tribulation or persecution.¹⁹⁹ After all, almsgiving is what prepared Job to bear nobly and thankfully the privation of all his things.²⁰⁰

God gives grace to the humble and God gives grace to the giving. If one does not give to others, the Spirit of God withdraws, meaning the withdraw of the grace of the Holy Spirit, which is God's gift of alms to us all. When that grace withdraws, we can no longer safely walk on the road that leads from earth to heaven.²⁰¹ Almsgiving tames the wildness of human nature, making people gentle.²⁰² It affects the heart, raising it to heaven, even as greed buries it in the earth.²⁰³ It is part of the "single-minded striving after eternal life" that purifies the heart.²⁰⁴ What cleanses the believer is on the one hand the compassion present in the giving of alms,²⁰⁵ and

¹⁹³ Clement of Rome *Προς Κορινθίους Δευτέρα* 16.4 AF, 51.

¹⁹⁴ John Chrysostom *Υπόμνημα εἰς τὸ κατὰ Ἰωάννην* 34.3 (PG 59.197); John Chrysostom *Υπόμνημα εἰς τὸ κατὰ Ματθαῖο* 41.4 (PG 57.451).

¹⁹⁵ Anom. *Opus Imperfectum in Matthaem* 2.12 (PG 56.643).

¹⁹⁶ Evagrius pointicus *Τον εν Σκίτει* A.63 (PG 40.1237b)

¹⁹⁷ John Chrysostom *Υπόμνημα εἰς τὴν πρὸς Τίτον* 14.3 (PG 62.698).

¹⁹⁸ John Cassian *Collationes* 2.21.33 (PL 49.1213b).

¹⁹⁹ Anom. *Opus Imperfectum in Matthaem* 31 (PG 56.794).

²⁰⁰ John Chrysostom *Εἰς τοὺς Ἀνδριάντας* 1.10 (PG 49.30).

²⁰¹ John Chrysostom *Υπόμνημα εἰς τὴν πρὸς Θεσσαλονικεῖς Πρώτον* 11.1 (PG 62.461).

²⁰² John Chrysostom *Υπόμνημα εἰς τὸ κατὰ Ματθαῖον* 21.4 (PG 57.300).

²⁰³ Peter Chrysologus *Sermones* 22 (PL 52.261).

²⁰⁴ Augustine *De sermone Domini in monte* 2.3.11. (PL 34.1274).

²⁰⁵ Ambrose *Expositionis in Evangelium Lucam* 7.100-101 (PL 15.1813cd).

on the other hand it is the purity of the hope in God that accompanies the giving of alms and makes the believers mind pure and spiritual.²⁰⁶ Almsgiving is one of the ways we can humble our souls,²⁰⁷ for we place the needs of others in front of ourselves. And the more humble one's appraisal of oneself, psychologists have found the more likely a person is to give.²⁰⁸ Giving alms fills the soul with hope and demonstrates one's faith, so that one can be like a green olive tree in the house of God.²⁰⁹ It is a "robe of loving-kindness, holier than a sacred vestment."²¹⁰ It grants a "great, a marvelous light,"²¹¹ and makes us more well-ordered, natural, and wise.²¹² It furthermore confirms our beliefs with actions enabling us to be victorious over error and heresy.²¹³ Giving to others is to life as a harbor is to travel by sea.²¹⁴ It is a safe place to be, especially when the sea of life rages. It is also likened to the "ladder fixed to heaven; it binds together the body of Christ," giving to others makes men like God.²¹⁵ It makes the image of God in man shine radiantly.

Good stewardship, tithing, giving, almsgiving are all obviously good for human flourishing. Psychologically, people who give without moral hypocrisy become more prosocial, less preoccupied with self, more honest, have a more admirable moral identity, and are generally happier. In the context of Orthodox Christianity, the believer becomes humble, kind, gentle, and hardworking. The giving believer becomes courageous in trials and wise in time of peace. And above all, his relationship with Christ deepens even as his relationship with his every brother and sister in Christ deepens. The believer finds salvation and by example

²⁰⁶ Anom. *Opus Imperfectum in Matthaem* 15 (PG 56.720).

²⁰⁷ John Chrysostom *Υπόμνημα εις τους προς Εβραίους* 9.5 (PG 63.79).

²⁰⁸ Simone Schnall and Jean Roper (2012); "Elevation Puts Moral Values Into Action," *Social Psychological and Personality Science* 3(3) 373-378.

²⁰⁹ Basil the Great *Εις την εξαήμερον* 5.6 (PG 29b.109ab).

²¹⁰ John Chrysostom *Υπόμνημα εις την προς Κορινθίους Δεύτερον* 20 (PG 61.539): "φιλανθρωπίας στολήν"

²¹¹ John Chrysostom *Υπόμνημα εις την προς τους Φιλιππίους* 4.5 (PG 62.211-212).

²¹² John Chrysostom *Υπόμνημα εις την προς τους Φιλιππίους* 14 (PG 62.286).

²¹³ John Chrysostom *Υπόμνημα εις το κατά Ματθαίον* 88.4 (PG 58.779-780).

²¹⁴ John Chrysostom *Υπόμνημα εις το κατά Ματθαίον* 52.4 (PG 58.524).

²¹⁵ John Chrysostom *Υπόμνημα εις την προς Τίτον* 6.3 (PG 62.698).

brings salvation closer to those touched by his generosity to the very least, his generosity to Christ.