

On Almsgiving

By Martin Chemnitz



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*(Chapter 4 of Chemnitz's locus on
Poverty in his Loci Theologici)*

Translated by Rev. Dr. James A. Kellerman

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PREFACE

Almsgiving or “charity” was a major concern of the Lutheran Reformation. In the treatise which follows, the “second great Martin” of the Lutheran Church, Martin Chemnitz (1522-1586), author of the Formula of Concord, lays out a clear theology of charity. This little section of Chemnitz’s great “Loci,” or doctrine text, is full of references to Holy Scripture which remain very instructive for us today. Chemnitz’s concern here is that the proper rejection of the medieval theology of charity — tied closely with the self-chosen poverty of monks — not destroy proper giving and concern for those in legitimate need. You might find it helpful to know that Chemnitz had firsthand knowledge of this issue as assistant to the Superintendent and later as Superintendent (Bishop) of the Church of Braunschweig/Woelfenbuettel. When Luther’s old nemesis, Duke Henry, died, his young son Julius became Duke, and sought out Chemnitz to carry out a thorough Lutheran reform of the hitherto Roman Catholic duchy, which included several monasteries.

This little section of the Loci, here in English for the first time, is a must read for all clergy and laity concerned with the church’s diakonic life of mercy. Those who are engaged in raising funds for the church and her various ministrations, would also do very well to give ear to the “second Martin.” For he is most concerned that the Gospel predominate in this area of the church’s life. I thank Rev. Dr. James Kellerman for the very fine translation.

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ON ALMSGIVING

BY MARTIN CHEMNITZ

(CHAPTER 4 OF CHEMNITZ'S LOCUS ON POVERTY IN HIS LOCI THEOLOGICI)

TRANSLATED BY REV. DR. JAMES A. KELLERMAN

[Tr. note: In his locus on poverty, Chemnitz has two groups especially in mind: the monks in Roman Catholicism, who taught that the poverty of the monks merited God's favor, and the Anabaptists, who taught that no one ought to own private property, but everything should be held in common. Before Chemnitz discussed the matter of almsgiving, he established that God has ordained private property and that it is to be managed for His glory rather than to be abandoned. After this, chapter on almsgiving Chemnitz discusses the marketplace and usury.]

Note the most beautiful balance in these portions of the doctrine. The Anabaptists see that there is a certain sharing of wealth and works among people in this life, as both the law of nature prescribes and the doctrine of the Gospel commands. Hence they argue that we ought to abolish entirely all ownership of wealth and any distinctions between individual properties. They have in mind to establish a common ownership of all property, as Plato taught, in which there would be no room for legal transactions. The witness of Scripture rightly and truly opposes them. The Scriptures approve of the distinguishing of properties as something divinely ordained.

As soon as we have established this truth, however, many use it as a pretext to nurture their greed. They think that they are righteous enough and more than righteous, provided that they refrain their hands from taking their neighbor's goods, even if they do not help human society by sharing any of their goods. For they suppose that the distinguishing of property is approved in Scripture as if each one ought to watch over his own wealth

nor care one whit about others, just as the rich man in **LUKE 12:19** is portrayed.

Therefore, it is proper and necessary for balance to append to any discussion about the distinguishing of properties the teaching about the legitimate exchange and sharing of possessions that takes place either through generosity or through other transactions.

One must show that God distributed the ownership of wealth so unequally, not because He chose the wealthy and rejected the poor or so that some could be fattened while others waste away from hunger, but because He wished in this way to spread around opportunities for the human race to be united in the common task of sharing wealth and service. Indeed, He also wants our faith to be seen and charity (love) exercised through that sharing of goods. So a careful notice of the order in this doctrine admonishes us many things.

There are also some elegant thoughts on this matter by the old fathers. Ambrose, commenting on Luke, says:

“Perhaps someone will say, what injustice is it, if I do not meddle in anyone else’s property, but diligently take care of my own? O impudent statement, what are you calling ‘your own’? Do you mean those things which you brought down with you in this world when you entered into this light, when you left your mother’s womb? With what property and with what provisions were you accompanied when you entered this world? Let no one call ‘his own’ what is common to all. That which more than suffices for one’s expenses has been violently obtained. You do not think, do you, that God is unjust, so that He does not distribute equally the provisions of life so that you are wealthy and in abundance, while others are in want and are needy? Do you not rather think that He wished to confer proofs of His kindness to you and to

crown your poor neighbor with the virtue of patience? When you have received the gifts from God and drawn them into your bosom, you do not think that you have done anything wrong, if you are the only one to have obtained the sustenance of so many people's lives? Who then is so unjust and so greedy as he who uses the livelihood of many other people not merely to satisfy his own needs, but to have an abundance and ingratiate his delights?"

Ambrose adds:

"You should be reproached for nothing less than robbery when you are wealthy and can be of assistance and yet reject the requests of the poor. It is the bread of the hungry that you hold back. It is the widows' covering that you hide away. It is the money to redeem the wretched that you dig up in your treasure chest. Therefore, you know that you can enter these goods as often as you can offer them.

The opinion of Chrysostom is cited in distinction 47: "God wanted us to be dispensers, not lords, of His riches.

Moreover, that sharing does not degenerate into endless confusion and seditious greed, but it has been ordained not only through the establishment of the state but also through the divine voice in the word of God. For the Seventh Commandment of the decalogue hallows the sharing of property in such a way that it does not permit anyone to seize the possessions of another with violent rapacity nor to take away another's property by fraud. For it says, "You shall not steal." Therefore, the commandment wishes that there be a legitimate exchange of property and services, in which an equality is maintained. And **2 COR. 8:8** states, "I say this not as a command," that is to say, alms ought not to be extortions compelled from people as the Anabaptists contend. Again, "For I do not mean that others should be eased and you burdened," [**2 COR. 8:13**] that is, there ought not to be wasteful squandering or prodigality. Indeed, God Himself ordained under Mosaic law

certain forms of legitimate exchanging of goods, namely, either through liberality or through contracts. Though the Mosaic law is not binding on us, nonetheless we can rightly ascertain from it what are the legitimate forms of exchanging property, the forms which God approves. In a later section we will explain contracts; in this present section we will explain alms.

It is altogether necessary to go over this doctrine repeatedly as it has been correctly and faithfully passed down. For it is very easy to go astray to one side or the other. The papists made out of almsgiving acts that made satisfaction for sins. Now after that opinion has been withdrawn, the zeal for helping the poor has clearly been restrained and has been all but wiped out. To make the explication of this article easier and more expeditious, we will divide it into a few different headings.

I.

The definition of the term must be considered as well as its use in the Scriptures. For the names that are applied in the Scriptures to objects are not only grammatical notations, but they embrace and demonstrate the very foundations of things. Therefore, lawyers call it “a donation;” philosophers call it “liberality” and “magnificence.” The Greek orators call it *eranon*, public contributions, from which meals were established for the poorer citizens at public expense.

The apostles used unique names, so that they might show from their very words that the alms given in the church ought to differ from the liberality espoused by the philosophers or a donation imposed by civic duty. Therefore, the writers of the Gospels always use the term *eleemosune* [gift of mercy], a term derived from the Septuagint translation. In DAN. 4:24 [4:27] the Hebrew text has, “Break off your sins by practicing” *bi-tsedakah*, that is, “in righteousness”; the Septuagint translates *bi-tse-dakah* as *eleemosune* [gift of mercy]. And that word is often repeated in the books of Sirach and Tobit.

This demonstrates that this word was used in the speech of the church of that time. And the apostles willingly used this word so well known and commonly accepted, because the name itself admonishes many things. For two things are required in this duty of charity, just as both are joined together in **LUKE 6:36, 38**: “Be merciful,” etc. The word *eleemosune* [gift of mercy] beautifully demonstrates that one ought not merely to look at the external largess, but above all one ought to instruct the mind, just as the name indicates. The term also indicates to whom alms ought to be given, namely, not to the wealthy and flourishing, but to those whose fortune is worthy of pity. The term also demonstrates to what purpose charity is bestowed upon the poor.

Therefore, the term itself encompasses and declares many thoughts of the Scripture. The Scripture instructs the mind of the one who gives: “If you pour yourself out for the hungry” (**IS. 58:10**); “Did I not weep for him whose day was hard? Was not my soul grieved for the needy?” (**JOB 30:25**); “Yet closes his heart against him” (**1 JOHN 3:17**). The Bible distinctly requires mercy in carrying out one’s duty of love toward the poor: “Light dawns in the darkness for the upright” (**PS. 112:5 [112:4]**); “Whoever is generous to the poor lends to the Lord” (**PROV. 19:17**); “Blessed be the man who took notice of you” (**RUTH 2:19**); “I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice” (**HOS. 6:6; MICAH 6:8**).

The name “gift of mercy” encompasses all these things. And it is recognized that the Greeks took that term from those very statements that make mention of mercy in gift-giving. The Hebrews have two words that are joined together in **DANIEL 4**. The first word is *tsedakah* or righteousness. It means, however, not only such grace as resides in the emotion of the mind, but advances toward the work itself, as in the phrase “In your righteousness free me” and “Do not enter into your righteousness [or judgment],” etc. And in **2 COR. 9:9** Paul retains the word “righteousness” instead of

“righteousness,” alluding to **Ps. 111:9** [**112:9**]. Even today the Jews call their gifts of mercy *tsedakah* or “righteousness.” The second word used by the Hebrews is CH-S-D. This term without doubt is explicated in those statements such as **Is. 58:10**; **JOB 30:25**; and **1 JOHN 3:17**. It denotes rather tender emotions, such as the *storgai* [affections] of parents. Such a concept is commonly rendered “mercy” or “kindness.”

These are the two terms of the Hebrews. The one instructs the emotions of the donor, the other teaches that the act of giving itself ought to be joined with the emotion. That may be the reason that it is called “righteousness,” namely, because the righteousness of God has distributed property unequally because of the reasons previously cited. Therefore, whoever closes his heart sins against the righteousness demanded by the Seventh Commandment.

According to Luke, Paul in **ACTS 24:17** uses the term “gifts of mercy.” Paul does not use the noun in his epistles, although he uses the corresponding verb (“The one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness,” **ROM. 12:8**). However, he does use other terms that are clearly noteworthy, each of which pronounce something about the teaching of giving alms. In **2 COR. 8:4** and **9:13**, as well as **ROM. 15:26**, he calls it *koinonia* [fellowship]. That is, he teaches that God ordains and approves of the distinction of properties, while at the same time he embraces the notion of sharing, just as has been said previously. He also calls almsgiving *charis*, that is, a gift advanced by a benevolent mind. He also calls it *diakonia* [service], so that there may not be a contracting or selling of the duty of charity, but that it might be done to help the poverty of the neighbor. He calls it *eulogia* [blessing] or munificence or joy in giving. In **1 COR. 16:1** he calls the opposite *pleonexia* [greed] and calls the alms logia [collection], since it was being collected publicly as contributions. **HEB. 13:16** calls it *eupoia* [well doing]; cf. **MARK 14:7**, “You can do good for {the poor}.” In **2 PETER 2:13**, banquets are called *agapai* [love feasts] because in a public place

after the church services these banquets were offered by the wealthier members for the poorer ones. This term was used by the old church fathers, especially Tertullian. In **ACTS 9:36**, alms are called “good works,” as a synonym to “gifts of mercy.” Cf. **GAL. 6:10** (“let us do good to everyone”) and **1 TIM. 6:18** (“*agathoergein*” [to do good]). In **2 COR. 9:6**, it is called a seed, because it is cast abroad just as over a field, but the fruit will follow in its own time (**ECC. 11:6**).

II.

There are many statements in the Scriptures, both in the Old and New Testaments, in which the command concerning the giving of alms is inculcated through earnest repetition. It is very useful to collect these statements and always to have them ready — to have them right in front of the eyes, as it were — because greed, the root of all evil, makes us rather stingy so that we easily grow tired (**GAL. 6:9**). We should have these statements ready at hand so that by meditating upon them and pondering them, the bowels of mercy might be aroused and opened up by God’s help.

Because some statements contain both promises and threats, while others describe the manner in which alms should be given, let us refer to them in their own place. Here we will note only those places which simply contain a commandment: “Open your hand” (**DEUT. 15:8**); “Share your bread with the hungry (**Is. 58:7**); “Break off ... your iniquities by showing mercy to the oppressed” (**DAN. 4:24 [4:27]**); “Give and it will be given to you” (**LUKE 6:38**); “Give to everyone who asks” (**LUKE 6:30**); “Give as alms” (**LUKE 11:41**); “Sell your possessions and give to the needy” (**LUKE 12:33**); “Give to the one who begs;” (**MATT. 5:42**); “Honor the Lord with your wealth” (**PROV. 3:9**); “When you give a feast ... ” (**LUKE 14:13**); “Make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth” (**LUKE 16:9**); “Whoever has two tunics ... ” (**LUKE 3:11**); “If your enemy is

hungry ... ” (ROM. 12:20). See also the following verses: SIRACH 3:23; 4:17, 36; 12:2-3; 14:13; 17:18; 18:25; 29:15; TOBIT 4:7, 12; 5:8-9.

III.

One ought to establish a definition of the matter, as to what is properly almsgiving. The scholastics say that there are two types of almsgiving, corporal and spiritual. They count and describe as corporal almsgiving that which appears in MATT. 25:35-36. They sum it up in this line of verse: “I visit, I give drink, I feed, I redeem (namely, the captives), I clothe (namely, the naked), I gather (guests, wanderers, and exiles), I bury (namely, the dead).” They summarize the spiritual almsgiving in this line of verse: “Counsel, chastise, comfort, forgive, bear, and pray. But we are not discussing now concerning all the works of mercy and charity that pertain to the Fifth Commandment. For there are rather many of those works than are able to be fit within the narrow confines of these two lines of verse. The question is only about those works of mercy that are called in that peculiar expression “gifts of mercy” and which pertain to the Seventh Commandment.

The scholastics hand down this definition: “almsgiving is the work in which something is given to the poor out of compassion and for God’s sake.” However, there is a very simple and certain method to establish true definitions, if they are gathered from certain statements of the Scriptures and are distributed into the various parts of the definition. And so let these two sentences be taken: 1 JOHN 3:17 (“If someone has *bion* [the means of supporting life], the world’s goods and sees his brother.”) and IS. 58:6-7 (“Loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke.”), and it will be clear what portions pertain to the method of true almsgiving:

- (1) The general category to which almsgiving belongs can be taken from the various names applied to it, so that it can be deemed a beneficence, a gift, a work, a gracious act of kindness or a work of mercy.
- (2) These statements show to whom largess ought to be given, namely to the needy, oppressed, broken and afflicted, whose condition and circumstances are worthy of commiseration. For these are the words of Scripture (**LEV. 25:35**): “Cannot maintain himself,” that is, not to the lazy. In this rule Scripture does not make any distinction between friends and enemies, but says, “Give to the one who begs from you” (**MATT. 5:42; LUKE 6:30; ROM. 12:20**).
- (3) The material cause of almsgiving, concerning what John calls the *bion* [the means of supporting life] of the world, is all things that pertain to the sustenance of this life in this world. The specific types of almsgiving are enumerated in **MATT. 25:34-36; IS. 48:6-7; ROM. 12:20**.
- (4) **1 JOHN 3:17** calls the heart the efficient cause. See also **IS. 58:10**: “Pour yourself out,” that is, the commiseration for the calamity of one’s neighbor.
- (5) John says that the final cause is the charity of God [**1 JOHN 4:10**].
- (6) Isaiah hands down this observation: It is a giving of alms to offer those things that are not owed under one’s civic duties and to forego those things that are owed, if a neighbor is oppressed and afflicted by this exaction of debt. So also Moses teaches in **LEV. 25:35-36; DEUT. 24:12**; and **EX. 22:25**. Therefore, almsgiving is a gracious gift, when the wants of the needy are relieved by the means that pertain to the sustenance of this life; and this takes place from the charity of God and the commiseration of the misfortune of one’s neighbor.

IV.

To whom do those commandments about almsgiving pertain? For the command concerning loving and fearing God, etc., pertained equally to Lazarus and to the rich man, but the commandment concerning the giving of alms did not apply to them both equally. **1 JOHN 3:17** answers this question with these words: “If anyone has the world’s goods ...” Paul says (**2 COR. 8:14**), “your abundance ... should supply their need,” and two verses earlier, “It is acceptable according to what a person has, not according to what he does not have.” Cf. **LUKE 16:9**, “Make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth”; **LUKE 3:11**, “Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise, “that is, those things that are necessary for the daily sustenance of life. And in **MATT. 25:40** there are stationed at our Lord’s right hand not only those who gave the alms, but also the hungry, thirsty, naked, etc. So in **ACTS 3:6** Peter answered the lame man seeking alms, “I have no gold and silver.” And in **LUKE 11:41** we read, “Give as alms, *ta enonta* [the things present], that are within.”

For God has distributed the human race into two categories:

- (1) There are some who possess wealth, to whom the commandment has been delivered concerning the giving of alms.
- (2) There are some needy people, who are to be helped by alms, as the Scripture says (**DEUT. 15:11**), “There will never cease to be poor in the land.” No third category, i.e., those who neither are in need nor give, can be found in the Scripture.

Moreover, that abundance, as Paul calls it, should not be understood as if he were talking about the wealth of Croesus [one of the wealthiest kings of antiquity], as if nobody should be bound to the commandment concerning alms except for those who abound in much overflowing wealth. For Paul (**EPH. 4:28**)

commands also those who seek their manner of living with the labor of their hands to set aside something out of their wages, that they might share it with the needy. And in **MARK 12:43** and **LUKE 21:3** Christ praises that poor little widow who put her mite into the treasury. She did that out of her own penury, which was barely sufficient for the daily sustenance of her own life, so that she reserved nothing for herself. And Christ prefers her to alms of the rich, who were donating more money by far, but out of their abundance. Our Savior Himself, although He lived by alms (**LUKE 8:3**; **JOHN 12:6**), nonetheless gave to the poor (**JOHN 2:8**; **13:29**).

Here a statement of Ambrose is relevant, which is cited in the decrees, distinction 86:

“The command of mercy is common to all walks of life, is necessary for people of all ages, and is to be handed down by all. The tax collector is not exempt, nor is the soldier, nor the farmer, nor the city dweller, rich or poor. All are admonished in common to help the one who does not have.”

V.

To whom should alms be given? John in **1 JOHN 3:17** and Paul in **EPH. 4:28** answer simply and in general terms that one ought to give alms to the needy. Elsewhere those who receive alms are enumerated by categories: the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, exiles, the sick, those who are not able to look for work (**MATT. 25:35-36**, **IS. 58:6-7**), those who have been bereft of their property because of their confession of faith or because of some misfortune (**ROM. 12:20**), widows who are alone and who are wearied by old age (**1 TIM. 5:16**). Moses says in **DEUT. 15:7** that whoever diligently does the duties of his calling ought to be supported by the giving of a loan, by the remission of debt and by other means, whenever he is deprived of the blessing of God.

Thus, the Scriptures enumerate nearly every kind of beggar. At the same time, Paul does not count the pay of the preachers in the church as alms. Instead, he calls it a debt (ROM. 15:27), something that was in his power to accept (1 COR. 9:4), something to be transferred from the account of the one giving into the one receiving (PHIL. 4:16). Augustine describes it nicely: “It is not a form of beggary, but his right, when a minister of the gospel receives his pay.” In the same way Paul calls the money paid to the civil magistrates tribute that is owed (ROM. 13:7). We have spoken in an earlier chapter about those hypocrites, those mendicant monks. Concerning them Christ says (MATT. 23:14): “Woe to you ... [who] devour widows’ houses and for pretense you make long prayers.” Such monastic beggary becomes blasphemy when it was woven into superstitions about satisfaction for sins and merit, such as in the tale told about Alexius, who demanded alms from his own servants from their own goods. Alexius is said to have heard a voice from heaven say that Rome stood because of his own merits. Of Christ’s poverty alone has it been written that by His poverty we have been made rich.

Moreover, Paul adds that one ought to see that the alms are able to be sufficient for those who are truly poor. He says (1 TIM. 5:16 AND 2 THESS. 3:12) that the able ought not to receive bread free of cost, that is, they should not live off of alms, but they ought to work, so that they may eat their own bread. He then adds in [2 THESS. 3:10], “If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat.” The civil law, too, imposes the penalty of slavery for those able bodied people who beg. SIRACH 122:5 says, “Give to the just and do not give to a sinner.” And it is often useful to give due diligence to considering to whom alms should be given, just as that statement of Augustine in his letter to the Donatist Vincent [*Letters* 93.4]:

“It is better to love with harshness than to deceive with gentleness. For it is more useful for bread to be taken from the hungry, if he neglects righteousness when secure

concerning his food, rather than for the bread to be distributed to him, and he be seduced by unrighteousness and acquiesce to it.”

Nonetheless, that examination ought not to be excessively rough and prying. For after Paul had reproached the parasites who were abusing the generosity of the Christians, he adds (2 **THESS.** 3:13), “Brothers, do not grow weary in doing good.” For although alms are often deceived, nonetheless Christ says (**MATT.** 10:41), “The one who receives a righteous person because he is a righteous person will receive a righteous person’s reward.” And in 25:40, He says, “You did it to me.” A comment of Chrysostom on **HEBREWS** 13 exists to this effect and is cited by Gratian under Distinction 42.

In addition, it is relevant to discuss here in what order alms ought to be given. To be sure, the command is universal: “Give to everyone who begs from you” (**LUKE** 6:30). Nonetheless, almsgiving has its own degrees and its own order. For first we are more closely obligated to those of our own household than to those outside of it. When Paul speaks about the maintenance of widows (1 **TIM.** 5:8), he says, “If anyone does not provide for his relatives ... he has denied the faith.” And Christ reproaches those who deprive their aging and ailing parents of their necessary nourishment under the pretext that they had offered gifts or alms in the temple treasury (**MATT.** 15:5). Secondly, [we are obligated to help fellow Christians.] “Let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are in the household of faith” (**GAL.** 6:10). Cf. 12 **JOHN** 3:17, “If he sees his brother in need ...”; **MATT.** 10:41, to the righteous and the prophet; **MATT.** 25:40: “one of the least of My brothers”; **LUKE** 16:9: “Make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth.” Thirdly, [we are obligated to help our neighbors.] “If one of your brothers should become poor,” (**DEUT.** 15:7). In the same chapter, but in verse 12 [verse 8], he states, “Open your hand to him and lend him sufficient for his need, whatever it may be.” Again, “There will be no lack of poor people in the land

you will inhabit.” Fourthly, strangers, travelers, and exiles ought to be helped. See **MATT. 25:35**; **IS. 58:17** [58:7]; **GEN. 18:3**; **19:2**; **ROM. 12:13**. And in **3 JOHN 9** Diotrephes is scolded because he had instructed the members of his household not to welcome strangers. Fifthly, “your enemy is hungry” (**PROV. 25:21**; **ROM. 12:20**).

Concerning how one ought to select the recipients of alms, the philosophers do not agree with the teaching of the church. Seneca says: “Although you ought to give to everyone who asks, nonetheless when giving alms we ought to investigate the recipients’ character, mind, dwelling, known associates, and the deference shown to us.” Even Ambrose (Book 1 of *On the Duties of the Clergy* [30.158]) orders us to consider the age, disability, and truthfulness of the recipient, as well as to ask whether it was by pure misfortune that he fell into poverty. Yet the Scripture hands down this rule in the parable of the Samaritan (**LUKE 10:33**): Let us ourselves not pick out those whom we wish to assist, but rather those whom God puts before us on whatever occasion, just as God put the man who had been robbed and beaten in the path of the Samaritan. Thus, Augustine says in book one of *Concerning the Teaching of Christ*,

“Although you cannot help everyone, you can be of assistance chiefly to those who are connected to you by the opportunities of place and time or some other matter. They have become joined to you, as it were, by some chance.”

VI.

How much ought to be given? Paul says that there is not a certain number or a definite measure in the Scriptures, as there is in tributes imposed by the government: “I say this not as a command, but to prove . . . that your love is genuine” (**2 COR. 8:8**), that is, Scripture indeed commands that alms be given, but it does not command the manner or the measure. It leaves it free to

the benevolent will of the godly, just as **1 COR. 16:2** says, “Each of you is to put something aside and store it up.” So, too, **2 COR. 9:7**: “Each one must give as he has decided in his heart.” To be sure, the Scripture generally describes the manner of liberality in the church in this way: “I do not mean that others should be eased and you burdened, but that as a matter of fairness, your abundance at the present time should supply their need.” (**2 COR. 8:13-14**); “Your springs . . .” (**PROV. 5:16**). John the Baptist preaches the same thing: “Whoever has two tunics” — that is, those things that are not necessary for the sustenance of one’s own life and body. Elsewhere indeed Christ Himself had two tunics and Paul even had a cloak in addition to his tunic. “Give as alms those things that are within” (**LUKE 11:41**). “The disciples determined . . . to send relief to the brothers” (**ACTS 11:29**). “Give to the poor according to your strength” (**SIRACH 14:13**).

Since avarice easily abuses that Gospel freedom as if it were a pretext, the Scripture adds some other statements: (1) “Honor the Lord with your wealth” (**PROV. 3:9**), that is, alms should not be given from what is spoiled and is useful to no one. (2) “Sell your possessions and give to the needy” (**LUKE 12:33**), which means in the case of need, just as I explained this statement in an earlier chapter [“On the abandonment of one’s goods”]. “He has given to the poor” (**PS. 112:9**); cf. what the disciples did in Acts. (3) “Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully” (**2 COR. 9:6**). In verse 8 he says that it is the work of the Holy Spirit to abound in good works. Also **2 COR. 8:8** states that genuine charity is shown through generous giving of alms. So Paul praises the Macedonian churches because they were inclined to give not only in accordance with their strength, but also beyond their strength, just as that poor little widow. From these foundations one can easily construe a full teaching concerning the manner and measure of alms giving.

VII.

How ought alms to be given, or what stipulations ought true, Christian almsgiving to have? An unregenerate man is able to make an outward contribution, as is said in the case of a certain Simon of Athens, who bequeathed all his possessions to the poor. The papists dream up many impious teachings concerning how almsgiving is virtuous by its own power [i.e., apart from the faith of the giver], as in that tale of Peter the tax collector. They imagine that the alms of Cornelius were made acceptable to God without faith and love. However, Paul says, “If I give away all I have . . . but have not love, I gain nothing” (1 COR. 13:3). And MATT. 6:2 says concerning the alms of the Pharisees, “They have received their reward.” Therefore, above all else, one ought to consider the differences in the act of giving itself between churchly almsgiving and pagan generosity. Thomas [Aquinas] says, “Alms ought to be an act of three virtues: mercy, justice, and service.” Others count the virtues of almsgiving as generosity, affection, and love. There are those who list the following as conditions of almsgiving: (1) willingness, (2) swiftness, love, (4) bounty, (5) kindness, (6) sincerity, (7) liberality, (8) property and (9) opportunity. But if the words are taken from the very statements of Scripture, the chief conditions of true Christian almsgiving seem to be able to be numbered in the following way.

- (1) It must be done out of faith, that is, not out of that hypocritical thought of merit, forgiveness of sins, and eternal life. But a person is reconciled by faith through Christ and decides by faith that this work is pleasing to God. See **HEB. 11:9; ROM. 14:23.**
- (2) It must be done out of love (SEE 1 COR. 13:3). That is to say, the Holy Spirit must move one’s heart and the alms must be given out of consideration of the command and will of God.

Consequently, because He Himself loved us first and demonstrated His love, giving His Son as the most excellent pledge of this love, we too love our brothers for His sake with whatever sort of distribution of alms, so that honor and obedience are offered to God, as **2 COR. 9:13** and **1 JOHN 3:17** make clear.

- (3) There should not be any wastefulness or prodigality, but one ought to have compassion for the common calamities, as it is called. See **IS. 58:10**; **JOB 30:25** and **1 JOHN 3:17**.
- (4) It should be done in sincerity (**ROM. 12:8**). “Let there be no seeking” — i.e., “after greater advantage or repayment,” as Jerome adds. “Let there be no hunting after a little glory” (**LUKE 14:12**), “that they may be praised by others” (**MATT. 6:2**; **23:5**), “but do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing” (**MATT. 6:3**). That is to say, you should not reveal to your neighbor nor should you even inform your own mind about it, for we will either render ourselves haughty or put ourselves above others. If you seek applause, it will be given to you, says Christ quite clearly in **MATTHEW 6** and **25**. Jerome, writing to Nepotianus [*Letters* 52.9], says, “There are those who offer a little to the poor that they may receive much. They seek riches under the guise of almsgiving, which really ought to be called legacy-hunting rather than almsgiving. For beasts, birds and fish are caught by putting a little food onto a hook.” Lactantius (*Institutes* 6.12) writes, “Above all, one must be careful that any hope for reward is absent from the act of showing mercy. For if reward is expected by anyone, it will no longer be an act of humanity, but a lending of some benefit.” Seneca says, “Nothing is fouler to the venal than a genuine act of mercy.” **SIRACH (29:11)** notes, “Do not drag the poor into slavery by your alms.”

- (5) It should not be done out of sadness or necessity, because God loves a cheerful giver (2 COR. 9:7). However, that cheerfulness arises when God makes every grace to abound in us so that, being sufficient in all things, we abound in every good work, as Paul says.
- (6) It should not be done sparingly or with ill disposition, as if we were controlled by greed, but it should be a generous and kind liberality, for this is what Paul calls “in generosity” (2 COR. 9:6) and Solomon calls “extending one’s hand” (PROV. 31:20) and Moses calls “open wide your hand” (DEUT. 15:11). Here the following statements of Scripture are relevant: “Honor the Lord ... with the firstfruits of all your produce” (PROV. 3[:9]); “Make yourself dear to the poor” (SIRACH 4:7); “Make your face cheerful every time you give” (SIRACH 35:11). “The gift of the foolish will not be useful to you. He will give scantily and he will reproach much” (SIRACH 20:14–15).

Gregory writes, “There are some people who, as soon as any needy brothers have requested some necessities, first hurl insulting words at them. Even if later they carry out their service of piety with deeds, nonetheless by their insulting words they lose their grace of humanity, so much so that they seem to be paying an atonement for the injury rendered, when gifts are given after insults.”

“Do not say to your neighbor, ‘Go, and come again tomorrow I will give it’ when you have it with you” warns PROV. 3:28. “Do not afflict the heart of a needy man and do not delay your gift to the poor” (SIRACH 4:3). “If I have withheld anything that the poor desired, or have caused the eyes of the widow to fail” (JOB 31:16). Saeneca writes, “It is an unpleasant gift which sticks too long to the hands of the giver.” He also says [*On Acts of Kindness* 2.1.2], “Nothing is bought at a dearer price than whatever is procured by begging”

[*On Acts of Kindness* 2.4.1]. Again: “Most pleasing are those acts of kindness which befall men easily, where there is no delay except for the modesty of the recipient.” [*On Acts of Kindness* 2.1.3] Macrobius says, “It is only partly an act of charity, if you quickly say no to what is requested.” Augustine says, “He loses both the power and the merit of his donation if he gives not in order to refresh the heart of the needy, but to be rid of the beggar whom he finds disgusting.” Again he says, “It is not perfect mercy which has to be extorted by begging.”

- (7) Alms ought to be conjoined with justice, so that one’s need may not be taken from someone else’s property or by robbery. “Share your bread” (Is. 58:7); “I hate robbery and wrong” (Is. 61:8). Thus, Zacchaeus gave back four-fold to the one whom he knew he had defrauded; later, however, since he was not able to make restitution to all, he gave half of his estate to the poor.
- (8) We should love not only in word and tongue, but in deed and truth, as 1 JOHN 3:18 and JAMES 2:16 make clear: “[If] one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace, be warmed and filled,’ without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that?”

Here a discussion of the manner of distributing alms is relevant, as it has been preserved and written down by the saints. Examples from the Old Testament: (1) A private individual gave money to a private individual (DEUT. 15:11). (2) Something was left behind in the field, vineyard and orchards for the poor in general (EX. 23:11; LEV. 19:10; 23:22; DEUT. 23:25; 24:19). (3) A public tithe was collected, which was distributed by people in public office. For three tithes had been instituted, one for God (from which the donors themselves could eat; DEUT. 14:22), another for the Levites (NUM. 18:21), yet another for the poor (DEUT. 14:28). And there was a public place appointed for them to bring those gifts. It was commonly

called the temple treasury (NEH. 10:37; EZEK. 40:17; MARK 12:41; LUKE 21:1). This was the place where Christ sat and taught (JOHN 8:2). In 2 KINGS 12:9 it is called the chest, into which money was thrown for building the temple. Cf. SIRACH 29:25 [29:15], “Throw money into the storehouse.” Paul seems to have imitated this in 1 COR. 16:2, “Each of you is to put something aside.”

In the New Testament private almsgiving is described in the same way (MARK 10:46; LUKE 16:20; ACTS 3:2). Also public contributions were gathered, not in the custom of Mosaic law, i.e., through tithes and through gleanings left in the fields, but in Christian freedom, as it seemed most convenient for the circumstances of the times, the people, etc. Sometimes it took place one way, other times a different, as in the sharing of goods mentioned in Acts, the donation of money in 2 COR. 8:14; 9:7 and 1 COR. 16:2. See 1 TIM. 5:16; PHIL. 4:16. Tertullian in his *Apology* [39.5–6] remembers that alms were accustomed to be given street by street; moreover, he mentions the chest into which the public alms money was gathered for the deacons and the poor. Later, Constantine bestowed revenue to the churches because alms were being collected rather scantily. Chrysostom in sermon 37 remembers that it had been the custom that alms would be offered to the priests so that they themselves might distribute to the poor in accordance with each one’s need. But because the deacons were deemed most honorable in this obligation, Chrysostom asked that they themselves dole out the money.

VIII.

Finally, one ought to add a consideration concerning the divine promises and threats which have been added to the teaching about alms. This last part, however, has been horribly distorted by the papists, who do not hesitate even today to ascribe to our alms the honor of making satisfaction for our sins and the honor of

meriting eternal life. The scholastics ascribe the honor of making satisfaction of sins to three items; the chief and most efficacious way of atoning for sins they ascribe to almsgiving; the others are prayer and fasting.

Indeed, when some of the older fathers of the churches saw the love of their parishioners growing cold, they went a little overboard in ensuring that their exhortations struck home with their audience. Lactantius ([*Institutes*] 6.12) says, “The reward of mercy is great. God has promised that He will forgive all the sins of one who shows mercy.” The opinion of Ambrose is quoted in the treatise *Concerning Repentance* (distinction 12, chapter C. “Medicine”): “We have more resources by which we may redeem our sins. You have money; redeem your sins. It is not that the Lord can be bought and sold. No, you yourself are venal and have sold yourself to your sins. Therefore, redeem yourself with your deeds and with your money, for sins are redeemed by almsgiving.”

Based on these sayings of the fathers, the papists gave birth to many sacrilegious opinions and legends. For after this godless notion was established, genuine charity clearly lost all its vigor. For no one likes to be good without being rewarded, as the poet says. No doubt God did not wish to put forth the doctrine concerning almsgiving without any explanation, but He impressed it upon us in various ways, viz., by commanding, exhorting and beseeching. He added promises and threats because he knew that the root of evils — greed — sticks very tenaciously to our corrupt flesh. Therefore it is useful always to keep in mind to explain this doctrine correctly in regards to those promises. The promises were not given so that we might attach to this doctrine some ungodly notion about rewards, but so that we might arouse thoughts of mercy by considering those promises.

Indeed, because many different promises have been added to this doctrine, they seem to be able to be conveniently divided into categories for the sake of teaching about them in an orderly

fashion, so that the explanation of the promises is not thrown into confusion. Some are general promises; others can be arranged in the following categories: promises of rewards, promises of external blessings (also called temporal or bodily blessings), promises of spiritual blessing which nonetheless are received in this life, promises of reward at the resurrection of the just in the life to come. These distinctions bring a little light to the explanation.

- (1) These are the general promises: “He will by no means lose his reward” (MATT. 10:42). “For God is not unjust so as to overlook your work and the love that you have shown for his name in serving the saints” (HEB. 6:10). “His righteousness endures forever” (PS. 112:9). “Blessed is he who is generous to the poor” (PROV. 14:21). “Whoever is generous to the poor lends to the Lord, and He will repay him for his deed” (PROV. 19:17). “Do good to the just and you will find great reward, if not from him himself, certainly from the Lord” (SIRACH 12:2). “Cast your bread upon the waters, for you will find it after many days” (ECCLES. 11:1).
- (2) These statements pertain to the category of promises of external blessings: “Give and it will be given to you” (LUKE 6:38). “Then your barns will be filled with plenty, and your vats will be bursting with wine” (PROV. 3:10). “One gives freely, yet grows all the richer” (PROV. 11:24). “Whoever gives to the poor will not want” (PROV. 28:27). “In the day of trouble the LORD delivers him” (PS. 40:1 [41:1]). “Alms will fight more than the shield of the mighty and more than a spear against your enemy” (SIRACH 29:18 [29:16-17]). “There is no one who ... will not receive a hundredfold now in this time ... with persecutions” (MARK 10:30). “Alms frees from every evil” (SIRACH 29:15). “It is well with the man who deals generously and lends, who conducts his affairs with justice ... his heart is firm, trusting in the LORD” (PS. 112:5, 7[8]). “Then shall your light break forth

like the dawn ... your righteousness shall go before you ... the Lord will guide you continually ... and you shall be like a watered garden” (Is. 58:8, 11) “The father’s alms will not be forgotten” (SIRACH 3:16). “In a time of misfortune he will find a solid foundation” (SIRACH 3:30 [3:17]) Consequently, bodily rewards are promised: (a) repayment in temporal goods, (b) relief in times of disaster, (c) bodily health and a long life, (d) good fortune and success in business, (e) blessings also for one’s posterity. The statement of Jerome is relevant here: “I do not remember ever reading about anyone dying an evil death who had led a merciful life.”

- (3) Spiritual promises have also been added to almsgiving. For because God’s mercy is not a number, He does not keep to a mathematical formula when dispensing punishments and rewards. It is as the scholastics say: He grants rewards more than we deserve and when he imposes punishments, He does this less than we deserve. Therefore, He promises even spiritual rewards to the bodily act of almsgiving. But we must accurately explain what they are and how they are promised, especially because of the errors of the papists who ascribe to almsgiving the power to atone for sins, redeem from eternal death and merit eternal life. To be sure, one ought to increase the preaching about good works, but it should be done in such a way so that the chief teaching of the Gospel and the benefits of Christ are not obscured. The forgiveness of sins, redemption from the devil and death, salvation and eternal life are the merits of Christ alone and the free gift of God, which are accepted by faith alone.

Therefore, the following statements have to be interpreted according to the analogy of faith. “Break off your sins by practicing righteousness, and your iniquities by showing mercy to the oppressed, that there may perhaps be lengthening of your prosperity” DAN. 4:24 [4:27]). “Alms frees from every sin

and from death and will not allow one's soul to go into the shadows. Alms will be a great pledge before God for all who give it" (TOBIT 4:11-12). "The angel said, 'Alms will free from death and it will be the means which purges your sins and it will make you find mercy and eternal life'" (TOBIT 12:9). "Water extinguishes a burning fire and alms will expiate sins" (SIRACH 5:33 [incorrect reference]). However, one follows the analogy of faith when the chief and main articles of heavenly teaching, which are certain, wellfounded and clear, are affirmed and an interpretation in accord with these articles is sought in obscure, or ambiguous passages, as well as those passages that do not directly treat those doctrines. The interpretation ought not to disagree with those chief articles, but should agree with them. The following are the most important, certain, firm and chief articles: (a) It is Christ's work and His alone as our mediator and high priest to redeem from sins, free us from death and merit eternal life. (b) These benefits are offered through the Gospel. (c) They are received through faith, not by works. Whatever promises are made about alms ought not to contradict this chief and most fundamental expression of the Gospel.

Therefore, these passages can be harmonized with the analogy of faith along these lines:

- (a) The statements of Daniel can be interpreted in this way. Daniel is treating the doctrine of complete repentance, just as is customary in the Old Testament. (Cf. **Is. 1:16** "Remove the evil"; **Ps. 37:27**: "Cease to do evil") The brevity of these statements can make them misunderstood. However, it is certain that true repentance comprises three parts: contrition, faith, and new obedience. Therefore, Daniel urges the king now to show worthy fruits of repentance by his acts of righteousness and kindness, because earlier he had sinned by his unrighteousness and his plunder of his subjects. Then it is also certain that forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation are promised for the converted and repentant. The

Gospel indeed adds the noteworthy and clear explanation that these benefits are not given because of the worthiness of any deeds (whether past, present or future), but they are freely given because of Christ. Finally, the Gospel clearly shows that these gifts are received in true repentance, not by contrition nor by the fruits of repentance, but by faith alone. And in this rather obscure and condensed passage, Daniel nevertheless makes explicit mention of faith and the righteousness of faith.

- (b) Brentz relates another way in which these passages can be harmonized with the evangelical doctrine. Alms is not what merits forgiveness and eternal life, nor is alms even the instrument by which this is acquired, but rather is the fruit of repentance. Therefore, alms is said to redeem from death and free from sin because they testify to us about faith, just as fruits attest to the goodness of a tree — and by faith we receive the forgiveness of sins and Christ dwells in our hearts, etc. Therefore, alms attests in this way concerning forgiveness of sins, these things have been given and received freely for Christ's sake through faith.
- (c) Some explain these statements as pertaining to temporal punishments of sins. It is certain that such punishments can be mitigated by complete repentance.
- (d) The following interpretation is related in the Apology [of the *Augsburg Confession* 4.263]: Alms do not free from the guilt of past sins (**ROMANS 3**) but from future sins. For while good works are being pursued, sins are avoided. Or you could say that God saves His elect so that they do not fall into tragic sin.
- (e) The excessive praises of almsgiving, as can be read in Tobit and Sirach, do not exist in the canonical books. Meanwhile, the statement of Daniel can be much more conveniently explained than those in Tobit and Sirach.

The remaining statements in Scripture about spiritual rewards are even clearer. Note the following: “Such sacrifices are pleasing to God” (HEB. 13:16). “Share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house . . . then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry, and He will say, ‘Here I am’” (IS. 58:[7,] 9). These statements do not contradict JOHN 16:23 (“Whatever you ask in My name . . .”). Instead, it is the opposite that reveals the true explanation of HEBREWS 13 and ISAIAH 58. “Whoever closes his ear to the cry of the poor will himself call out and not be answered” (PROV. 21:13). In ACTS 10:4, when the angel announced to Cornelius, who already had the beginnings of faith, that he should seek out a fuller explanation from Peter, the angel said, “Your prayers and alms have ascended before God.” Thus, an increase of spiritual gifts was given to the widow of Zarephath and to Obadiah, who fed a hundred prophets in the caves. This explains the following passages: “He [who] is a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward, and the one who receives a righteous person because he is a righteous person will receive a righteous person’s reward” (MATT. 10:41); “for they shall receive mercy” (MATT. 5:7); “Give as alms those things that are within, and behold, everything is clean for you” (LUKE 11:41), namely in the enjoyment of one’s possessions.

Even the faithful are hardly able to avoid all sin in the acquisition and use of earthly goods (that is why it is called “unrighteous Mammon”). Therefore, he says, “Cleanse yourself inwardly, and outwardly give alms; then all things will be pure,” namely, in their use. Cf. 1 COR. 7:14, where the children [of a believing mother] are called “sanctified,” and 2 COR. 9:8,10 (“And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work”). Therefore, these are the spiritual promises: (a) God is pleased. (b) He will hear and show mercy. (c) He will redeem you from sin and free you from death. (d) You will grow in knowing God. (e) You will abound in

every good work. **(f)** God will keep you from future sins. **(g)** He will give you an antidote against avarice, namely, sufficiency. **(h)** He will hallow your enjoyment of property.

(4) The pious act of giving alms has the promises not only for this life but also for the future life. “Go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven” (**MATT. 19:21**). “Provide yourselves with moneybags that do not grow old, with a treasure in the heavens that does not fail” (**LUKE 12:33**). “You will be repaid at the resurrection” (**LUKE 14:14**). “Your Father . . . will reward you” (**MATT. 6:4**), just as is described in **MATT. 25:34**. “Inherit the kingdom” (**LUKE 16:9**). “Your righteousness shall go before you; the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard” (**IS. 58:8**). “[You will] receive a hundredfold now in this time” (**MARK 10:30**). “Storing up treasure for themselves as a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is truly life” (**1 TIM. 6:19**). For although eternal life is a gift of God for Christ’s sake, nonetheless it is at the same time a payment for the works of charity.

Finally, one must add as an antithesis a list of the threats for not giving alms, so that the promises may be understood more correctly. “Whoever gives to the poor will not want” (**PROV. 28:27**). “Whoever closes his ear to the cry of the poor will himself call out and not be answered” (**PROV. 21:13**). “Do not turn your eyes away from the poor in anger, for his plea will be heard as he curses you in the bitterness of his soul” (**SIRACH 4:5-6**). “Whoever oppresses a poor man insults his Maker” (**PROV. 14:31**). “Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly” (**2 COR. 9:6**). “The one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption” (**GAL. 6:8**). “Judgment is without mercy to the one who has shown no mercy” (**JAMES 2:13**). “How does God’s love abide in him?” (**1 JOHN 3:17**). “I was hungry and you gave me no food”

etc. (MATT. 25:42). Cf. the parable of the rich man in LUKE 16:19 and the history of Nabal in 1 SAM. 25:2. However, all these threats can be clearly categorized in the same way as the promises.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Chemnitz cites Chrysostom's opinion, "God wants us to be dispensers, not lords, of His riches." (p.4) What is Chrysostom's point?
2. What is the effect of greed on one's attitude of mercy? (p.8)
3. Scripture describes people who give alms and those who need them. What is significant about the lack of a third category? (p.12)
4. What are the scriptural conditions for true Christian almsgiving? (p17ff.) How do these differ from popular notions about philanthropy?
5. Is there one best way to help the needy? (p.21ff)
6. When we consider the entire Gospel message, we know that giving alms does not earn us forgiveness. So what benefits do we receive from giving alms? (p.28)
7. Finally, why do Christians give alms, or do any other work of mercy? (cf. **EPH. 2:10**)

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