



BY JERRY
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ALMS AND ALMSGIVING

ALMS ARE ACTS OF CHARITY that usually take the form of money or goods given to persons in need. The word derives from a Greek term built on the word for mercy or compassion (*eleos*) and from which the English language has the word “eleemosynary,” a formal term for being charitable.

In Acts 3, a crippled man sat at the temple gate to ask alms from those who entered. When he asked Peter and John for help, the apostles explained they had no money, but they would give him what they had. What they had was the powerful name of Jesus, by which the lame man was healed.

What lay behind the practice of sitting in a public place to ask for help from those who passed by? Were alms available from any sources other than roadside begging? How deeply rooted was this practice in Jewish life? How prominent was this practice in the first century as reflected in the New Testament?

In the Old Testament

Almsgiving was a long-standing practice in Jewish life. The Mosaic Law called for acts of mercy toward the poor such as gleaning, a practice that required reapers to leave portions in vineyards and fields for the needy to gather (Lev. 19:9-10). In addition, portions of the tithe were for orphans and widows (Deut. 14:28-29). Deuteronomy 15:7-11 expands on the expectation that the people would be generous to the poor, concluding with the acknowledgment, “For the poor will never cease from the land; therefore I command you, saying, ‘You shall open your hand wide to your brother, to your poor and your needy, in your land’” (NKJV). An Old Testament beatitude expresses the right attitude behind almsgiving, “Blessed is he who is generous to the poor” (Prov. 14:21, ESV), as does the related commendation, “He who has pity on the poor lends to the LORD” (19:17, NKJV).

Non-biblical Jewish writings indicate that almsgiving continued to be a common practice after the close of the Old

Testament and throughout the intertestamental period. The practice gained increasing significance in the teaching of the rabbis, judging from the frequent references to almsgiving in their writings. For example, when the destruction of the temple spelled the end of animal sacrifices in Jewish worship, one Jewish source said concerning almsgiving, “Prayer with fasting is good, but better than both is almsgiving with righteousness. A little with righteousness is better than wealth with wrongdoing. It is better to give alms than to lay up gold. For almsgiving saves from death and purges away every sin. Those who give alms will enjoy a full life, but those who commit sin and do wrong are their own worst enemies.”¹ Such views motivated pious Jews of Jesus’ day to engage in almsgiving. Jesus saw, though, that some gave for show and fame rather than as an expression of personal religious devotion. Later rabbinic teaching regarded almsgiving as “one of the most important deeds of private piety.”²

Right: Nicanor Gate from the model of 1st cent. A.D. Jerusalem. The gate is named for a wealthy Jewish man from Alexandria, Egypt, who donated its beautiful doors. The gate opened into the court of the men, segregating it from the court of the women. It was accessible by 15 curved steps, on which the Levites stood singing and playing. Many believe the doors at the top of the steps to be the Beautiful Gate of Acts 3:2.



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ KEN TOUCHTON (2/23/17)



Workers gleaning grain in central Israel.



Left: A beggar in Nazareth.

A Jewish widow's mite. Lower left: The obverse shows a vessel for pouring libations. The Greek inscription reads: TIBERION KAICAROS LIS, which means "of Tiberius, year 16." This indicates the coin was struck in A.D. 29. It was found at Herod's fortress palace, the Herodium, near Bethlehem. Upper right: The reverse shows a double cornucopia.



In the New Testament

Jews in Jesus' day practiced almsgiving. Jesus introduced the matter of almsgiving in His Sermon on the Mount by referring to it, along with the practices of prayer and fasting, as an act of righteousness (Matt. 6:1). As such, almsgiving had continued to be a primary evidence of devout Jewish piety or practical worship. Jesus endorsed almsgiving, praying, and fasting as practices His disciples and other followers would continue to observe. When He specified almsgiving as the first-mentioned act of righteousness, however, Jesus changed His word of reference from righteousness to the afore-mentioned term for deeds of mercy (v. 2). In giving corrective instructions about giving alms in His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus not only began with the assumption that His hearers would continue the practice, but they also would eliminate all pretense related to public recognition for doing deeds of mercy. Significantly, He opened His teaching by saying, "When" you give alms, not "if" you do this. His concern was to address motives in an action already practiced. Jesus went on to apply the corrective for wrong motives to all three practices of almsgiving, praying, and fasting. He stressed the importance of sincerity and secrecy. In short, Jesus admonished His hearers to do their almsgiving in secret, make their prayers behind closed doors, and disguise their fasting as celebration. His purpose was to emphasize that His followers were not to participate in religious acts in order to gain fame or others' praise.

His Sermon on the Mount was not the only time Jesus spoke about almsgiving. On another occasion He instructed His followers to "give alms of such things as you have" (Luke 11:41, NKJV). He expected His disciples would not abandon their Jewish piety—and they would continue such disciplines as almsgiving, prayer, and fasting. Almsgiving was thus part of the expectation of first-century Jews. This was evident at the Last Supper; almsgiving would have been an expected gesture during the week of Passover. When

Judas left the upper room after hearing Jesus identify him as the betrayer, the others surmised Judas left in order to make a donation to the poor, since he had the group's money box (John 13:28-29).

Following Jesus' resurrection and ascension the apostles continued the practice of helping the needy, even requesting that others do the same (Gal. 2:10). As the Christian movement spread beyond Judea and Galilee, a follower of Christ named Tabitha gained a good reputation for her charitable deeds in the area of Joppa (Acts 9:36). In Romans 12, after asking believers to pursue a transformed life, Paul listed many evidences of such a life. One of them reads, "Distributing to the needs of the saints" (Rom. 12:13, NKJV). In short, what was prominent in the Mosaic Law and continued as a part of Jewish piety across the centuries was still being practiced during Jesus' lifetime and after His ascension.

The experience of Peter and John in Acts 3 indicates persons asking for help positioned themselves in public places, such as at the temple gates. Jesus had encounters with cries for help along the roadways, such as when He encountered Bartimaeus, a blind beggar sitting by the roadside in Jericho (Mark 10:46-47). John 9:1-8 tells of another blind beggar who used to sit and beg until Jesus gave him his sight.

On a broader scale, the New Testament includes as deeds of compassion or loving-kindness other practices beyond giving help to beggars, money to the poor, food to the hungry, or clothes to the needy—such acts as caring for the sick (Matt. 25:36), caring for orphans and widows (Jas. 1:27), showing hospitality to strangers (Heb. 13:2), and being considerate of the handicapped (Luke 14:13-14). The evidence is that loving generosity generally, and almsgiving particularly, continued as a standard Christian practice at least to the fourth century.³

The New Testament teaches that giving financially to those in need is an important expression of our faith. We should make sure our giving is motivated by love for God and compassion for people, however, without seeking to draw attention to ourselves. When we use what God has given us to affect positively others' lives, we can trust that such giving will make a difference now both for the giver and receiver, as well as impact one's eternal rewards. 🔥

1. Tobit 12:8-10. New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright © 1989 the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America.

2. Hans Dieter Betz, *The Sermon on the Mount* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1995), 354-55.

3. George B. Eager, "Alms; Almsgiving" in *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, ed. James Orr (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1915), 102.

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