

Some Words About...

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Eleemosune (alms)

The Greek word *eleemosune* meant giving alms to the needy. Sirach urged, “Do not fail to give alms” (7:10). And Tobit advised, “Give alms in proportion to what you have” (4:7). He insisted that he himself “gave alms often” (3:16). Elsewhere the Septuagint uses the word to mean righteousness.

New Testament

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, “whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others.... But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret” (Matthew 6:2-4). This is one application of the general principle stated in 6:1 that we should not perform acts of piety to win the approval of others but as sincere responses to God’s love. God gives blessings freely out of love for us, not to earn our admiration or praise. If we are to be true followers of God, we must live lives patterned after God’s way. Our reputation may be what others think of us, but our character must be what God sees us to be.

Jesus’ reply to the Pharisees in Luke 11:41, “Give for alms those things which are within,” means simply that if you give yourself to others, your actions will be acceptable to God. The whole point of the Pharisees’ ceremonial washing (11:37-40) and tithing (11:42) and parading in places of worship (11:43) was to show off. But you don’t show off to God. God is not impressed by your sanctimonious acts. If you see what others need — physically, emotionally, socially, or spiritually — and you can help — do so.

Having warned his followers “be on your guard against all kinds of greed, for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions” (Luke 12:15), and having told the parable of the Rich Man, Jesus emphasized the generosity of God and the need to put their trust in him and not in material things (12:22-31). In 12:33 he tells them “Sell your possessions and give alms.” He says “where your treasure is, your heart will be also” (12:34).

A man lame from birth lay “daily at the gate of the temple called Beautiful Gate so that he could ask for alms from those entering the temple. When he saw Peter and John about to go into the temple, he asked them for alms” (Acts 3:2-3). He got more than alms. He got cured. People saw him walking and leaping and they “recognized him as the one who used to sit and ask for alms” (3:10). They were amazed.

In Joppa (modern Tel Aviv) a female follower named Dorcas who “was full of good works and almsgiving” (Acts 9:36) died. Her fellow followers heard that Peter was in the vicinity and asked him to come. He went to her house and healed her. We know little about Dorcas (or Tabatha, as Peter called her). Her name doesn’t appear elsewhere in the New Testament. She was one among many followers of the Way but she was especially remarkable for her good works and alms, and she was important enough to the Christian community for them to send a couple of representatives to the nearby town of Lydda where Peter was and to urge him “Please come to us right away” (9:38). They did not ask him to come and restore her to life but they probably wanted him to attend the funeral. His healing her made a great impression and “many believed in the Lord” (9:42). So Peter continued his ministry in Joppa and was summoned by a Roman centurion who also “gave alms generously” (10:2). The centurion was told in a vision “your prayers and your alms” had been seen by God and he was to send to Joppa for Simon Peter (10:4-5). Peter came and while he preached the gospel the Holy Spirit came upon all (10:44).

In Acts 24:10-21 Paul, brought before Felix the governor, makes his reply to charges which some Jews had brought against him. He describes his actions for the past couple of weeks. He points out that “I came to bring alms to my nation” (24:17). These were offerings that he had collected on his latest

missionary journey. Felix ordered Paul to be placed in what amounted to house arrest until the arrival of Lysanius the Tribune.

The collection for the saints in Jerusalem was a major item in Paul's agenda. The Jews of the diaspora had strong ties with Jerusalem and the Christian Jews of the diaspora had especially strong feelings for their fellow Christian Jews there. The fact that Paul here speaks of bringing alms to the Christians in Jerusalem indicates that many of them were poor. (See Romans 15:26 also.)

Today

In our conversation we seldom use the word "alms." Instead of saying we give alms, we say we give to charity (a strained use of "charity." Even more strained is our saying that the organization which dispenses alms is a "charity." But that is another, though related, matter.) I doubt that the word "alms" appears in *The Lutheran* even once a year unless quoted from the Bible. And yet our culture holds the highest opinion of giving to people in distress, whether from poverty, natural disaster, illness, oppression, or other causes. It is just the word "alms" which is despised. The act itself is applauded and enjoined.

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