

To Be Noticed - 2 - Giving Alms

Occasionally in our study of the Scriptures, words from the original language must be introduced to see a connection that is invisible in English. While alms and mercy have little connection in English they are closely related to each other in the words Jesus chose and the Holy Spirit recorded.

“ele-os... mercy; kindness or good will towards the miserable and afflicted, joined with a desire to relieve them;...” (Thayer, P. 203; 1653)

“ele-e-mosune...1. mercy, pity... especially, as exhibited in giving alms, charity... to practice the virtue of mercy... show one’s compassion...” (Thayer, 203 ;1654)

Those who heard Jesus spoke Greek and saw this connection clearly. An *alms* was a deed or action motivated by *mercy*. When tragedy strikes, feelings of pity and compassion begin form. When these emotions lead us to desire to help, *mercy* has been created. When this *mercy* moves us to do something we are giving an *alms*. *Mercy(ēl-e-os)* is the root and *alms (ele-e-mosune)* is the fruit. When pity leads to mercy and mercy moves to act, the action is giving an alms.

Although some believe that feelings of compassion and mercy alone are commendable, if they do not move to action there has been no alms and there is no profit to the feelings.

What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him? 15 If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, 16 and one of you says to them, “Depart in peace, be warmed and filled,” but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what does it profit? James 2:14-17

Yet the opposite is also true. All actions that are done to alleviate suffering that are not motivated by mercy in the context of *agape-love* also have no profit!

And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing. 1 Cor 13:3

Jesus was often moved by compassion and mercy that led Him to act.

And when Jesus went out He saw a great multitude; and He was moved with compassion for them, and healed their sick. Mt. 14:14-15

Then Jesus, moved with compassion, stretched out His hand and touched him, and said to him, “I am willing; be cleansed.” Mk. 1:41

And Jesus, when He came out, saw a great multitude and was moved with compassion for them, because they were like sheep not having a shepherd. So He began to teach them many things. Mk. 6:34-35

So when Dorcas was described as a “*woman full of good works and **almsdeeds** which she did*” (Acts 9:36), it included both the emotions and the deeds. When the lame man was laid at the beautiful gate daily “*to ask **alms** of them that entered into the temple*” (Acts 3:2-5), he was hoping to create the compassion that would bring an alms. When Cornelius “*gave much **alms** to the people, and prayed to God always,*” and his “*prayers and **alms**” had “gone up for a memorial before God” (Acts 10:1-4), he had both the emotion of mercy and the deeds of almsgiving. When Paul wrote the Corinthians and other churches about a contribution for needy saints in Jerusalem, he felt both compassion and mercy as he went to Jerusalem to “*bring **alms** to my nation, and offerings*” (Acts 24:17).*

Jesus spoke of the necessity of doing these actions and strongly condemned those who were not moved by compassion at the plight of their brethren to feel the mercy that moved them to give alms.

Then the King will say to those on His right hand, ‘Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: 35 for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; 36 I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me.’ Mt. 25:34-36

Then He will also say to those on the left hand, ‘Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels: 42 for I was hungry and you gave Me no food; I was thirsty and you gave Me no drink; 43 I was a stranger and you did not take Me in, naked and you did not clothe Me, sick and in prison and you did not visit Me.’ Mt. 25:41-43

Once we understand the true nature of *agape-love*, first creating mercy and then giving alms, we realize how important these alms are to our relationship with the Lord. Anything that lessens the value of these actions is extremely dangerous to our soul and our eternal destiny.

When you Give Alms, Do not Sound a Trumpet

Since all true almsgiving begins with feelings of compassion and pity and moves to mercy (desire to act), if it stops with the feelings and never moves to the action it is not giving alms. If the actions that do alleviate the suffering of another are not moved by this mercy it is still not almsgiving. Jesus warned in this sermon that there is another grave threat to our giving alms that could destroy its value and remove any hope of reward from God.

When therefore you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be honored by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. 3 But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing 4 that your alms may be in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will repay you. Mt 6:2-4

“Sound a trumpet” is a metaphor for “look at me!” It includes anything we might devise to draw attention to ourselves. We need to see this desire as a temptation that we must flee. Everyone enjoys praise, and it is often a temptation to reveal our good deeds to others in order to elevate ourselves in their sight. But Jesus warns us of the extreme danger of this temptation.

Any attempt to use an act of mercy and compassion to elevate ourselves taints the act and destroys its value. Jesus revealed that those who do this are imitating hypocrites and thus become hypocrites. In seeking human glory, or the praise of men in an act of service to God we become a hypocrite to God. It taints the action just as poison taints food. As the tiniest amount of poison destroys food, so any desire for the praise of men destroys alms. When motives of pride and self-seeking are mixed into our actions, we are a hypocrite who is only pretending or play acting that they are alms.

“hupokrites... the acting of a stage-player... dissimulation, hypocrisy...” (Thayer, 643; 5272)

No matter how sincere the pity and compassion and no matter how much we also wanted it to be pleasing to God, the addition of seeking the praise of men destroys its value completely and leaves us with only the label of a hypocrite who is acting a part and not genuine in his actions.

True righteousness demands more of a disciple than just doing the right things. They must also be done with the right thoughts and intentions. The giving of alms must be done exclusively for God, motivated by genuine mercy toward the plight of the one in need. The disciple is so aware of the danger that in doing alms, he seeks to even keep his left hand unaware of what the right hand is doing. This is an idiom for doing everything possible to keep it a secret. The giving of alms is always done in the sight of God and for the devout Christian, God is the only one who should be aware of it. Jesus promised that God would openly reward those disciples who fulfill these conditions. But any desire for the praise of men so completely removed its value in God’s eyes that Jesus warned us that God would give no reward. All that will ever be gained from alms tainted with wrong motives is the praise men give.

It is the duty of the disciple to fulfill these words. Yet in actual practice, once again Christians are forced to walk the strait and narrow way. Peter and John did an alms for the blind man at the temple. Although their motives were pure, they could not keep it secret.

a certain man lame from his mother’s womb was carried, whom they laid daily at the gate of the temple which is called Beautiful, to ask alms from those who entered the temple; 3 who, seeing Peter and John about to go into the temple, asked for alms. Acts 3:1-3

After they gave this man an act of mercy and compassion by healing him, everyone heard about it:

And all the people saw him walking and praising God. 10 Then they knew that it was he who sat begging alms at the Beautiful Gate of the temple; and they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him. Acts 3:9-10

Sometimes the consequence of a good deed allows our light to shine leading others to glorify our Father in heaven. We cannot always control what others see. But we must try to follow Jesus words in our heart and keep these things secret as much as we can. The real goal of secrecy is motive, not consequence. If others see, but we sought to keep it hidden, we have not violated our Lord’s demand here. It was seen of men, but we did not seek it. This is exactly what happened to Tabitha.

Now there was at Joppa a certain disciple named Tabitha, which by interpretation is called Dorcas: this woman was full of good works and almsdeeds which she did. Acts 9:36

As she cared for the needs of widows, she could not control their desire to praise her. But it was a consequence. She was doing almsdeeds for them in service to God, out of love and mercy.

all the widows stood by him weeping, showing the tunics and garments which Dorcas had made while she was with them. Acts 9:39

It is a similar principle to the one set forth in Proverbs:

Let another man praise you, and not your own mouth; A stranger, and not your own lips. Pr. 27:2

God warned us never to “blow our own horn.” We must never praise ourselves to others or do things in hopes that they will praise us. But if by our actions and deeds we prove to be worthy and others praise us, we can rejoice in such praise. In the same way, as we do acts of service to others, we do not seek for praise, but if it comes, we can rejoice that our actions have led others to see our good works, for in praising us, we are letting our light shine and bringing glory to God.

having your conduct honorable among the Gentiles, that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may, by your good works which they observe, glorify God in the day of visitation. 1 Peter 2:9

When it is impossible to do someone a favor out of love and mercy that will be known, Jesus words only refer to the motive in the heart. Yet when it is in our control, we must strive for only God to know.