

**STUDIES IN ORTHODOXY: Spiritual Disciplines**  
**Class III, January 31: Almsgiving**

“<sup>9</sup> ‘When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not wholly reap the corners of your field, nor shall you gather the gleanings of your harvest. <sup>10</sup> And you shall not glean your vineyard, nor shall you gather *every* grape of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the stranger: I *am* the Lord your God. ...<sup>18</sup> You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the children of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I *am* the Lord.’”

- *Leviticus* 19:9-10, 18

“<sup>35</sup> ‘If one of your brethren becomes poor, and falls into poverty among you, then you shall help him, like a stranger or a sojourner, that he may live with you. <sup>36</sup> Take no usury or interest from him; but fear your God, that your brother may live with you.’”

- *Leviticus* 25:35-36

“<sup>7</sup> If there is among you a poor man of your brethren, within any of the gates in your land which the Lord your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart nor shut your hand from your poor brother, <sup>8</sup> but you shall open your hand wide to him and willingly lend him sufficient for his need, whatever he needs.”

- *Deuteronomy* 15:7-8

“<sup>21</sup> He who despises his neighbor sins;  
But he who has mercy on the poor, happy is he.  
...<sup>31</sup> He who oppresses the poor reproaches his Maker,  
But he who honors Him has mercy on the needy.”

- *Proverbs* 14:21, 31

“<sup>6</sup> *Is* this not the fast that I have chosen:  
To loose the bonds of wickedness,  
To undo the heavy burdens,  
To let the oppressed go free,  
And that you break every yoke?  
<sup>7</sup> *Is it* not to share your bread with the hungry,  
And that you bring to your house the poor who are cast out;

When you see the naked, that you cover him,  
And not hide yourself from your own flesh?”

- *Isaiah 58:6-7*

“Take heed that you do not do your charitable deeds before men, to be seen by them. Otherwise you have no reward from your Father in heaven. <sup>2</sup>Therefore, when you do a charitable deed, do not sound a trumpet before you as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have glory from men. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. <sup>3</sup>But when you do a charitable deed, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, <sup>4</sup>that your charitable deed may be in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will Himself reward you openly.”

- *The Gospel According to St. Matthew 6:1-4*

“<sup>14</sup>What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him? <sup>15</sup>If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, <sup>16</sup>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? <sup>17</sup>Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.”

- *Epistle of St. James 2:14-17*

“<sup>17</sup>But whoever has this world’s goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him? <sup>18</sup>My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth.”

- *First Epistle of St. John 3:17-18*

“Do you wish to honor the Body of the Savior? Do not despise it when it is naked. Do not honor it in church with silk vestments while outside it is naked and numb with cold. He who said, “This is my body,” and made it so by his word, is the same who said, ‘You saw me hungry and you gave me no food. As you did it not to the least of these, you did it not to me.’ Honor him then by sharing your property with the poor. For what God needs is not golden chalices but golden souls.”

- *John Chrysostom, On the Gospel of St. Matthew, 50, iii*

“When someone steals another's clothes, we call them a thief. Should we not give the same name to one who could clothe the naked and does not? The bread in your cupboard belongs to the hungry; the coat unused in your closet belongs to the one who needs it; the shoes rotting in your

closet belong to the one who has no shoes; the money which you hoard up belongs to the poor. ... If every man took only what was sufficient for his needs, leaving the rest to those in want, there would be no rich and no poor.”

- Basil the Great

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### “When you do a charitable deed...”

Acts of mercy or mercifulness (ἐλεημοσύνην)

- Our empathy is to extend to all persons.
- “The act of love toward the other seeks to restore the recipient and the giver.”
- Can’t live in this world without heartfelt concern for others.

“Brother, I recommend this to you: ‘Let the weight of compassion in you weigh the scales down until you feel in your heart the same compassion that God has for the world’

- Isaac of Nineveh, *Ascetic Treatises*, 34

### Almsgiving and the Kingdom of God

“A brother had as his only possession a book of the Gospels. He sold it and spent the proceeds on food for the starving. And he added these memorable words: ‘What I sold was the very book that tells me: “Sell what you have and give to the poor”.’”

- Evagrius of Pontus, *Practicus*, 97

- Example of the parable of the Good Samaritan and “sympathetic consciousness”
- Good Samaritan as image of Christ co-suffers with pain of beaten man.
- Being compassionate is being “rightly ordered”

“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: <sup>35</sup> 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; <sup>36</sup> I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me.”

- *The Gospel According to St. Matthew 25:34-36*

- In this parable, those who show mercy are unaware of it. ...these are simply rightly ordered.
- Criterion of judgment is “sacrificial love” (See Matthew 25:31-46 for the Sunday of Judgement before Great Lent)

“When Christ comes to judge us, what will be the criterion of His judgement? The parable answers: *love*— not a mere humanitarian concern for abstract justice and the anonymous “poor,” but concrete and personal love for the human person, any human person, that God makes me encounter in my life. ... To remind men of this *personal* love and vocation, to fill the sinful world with this love – this is the true mission of the Church. ... Not all of us are called to work for “humanity,” yet each one of us has received the gift and the grace of Christ’s love. .... Thus, on whether or not we have excepted this responsibility, on whether we have loved, or refused to love, shall we be judged. For “in as much as you have done it unto, the least of these, my brother in, you have done it unto me...”

- Alexander Schmemmann, *Great Lent*

### **Face to Face**

- We have to condition ourselves to compassionate almsgiving.
- God offers this as a means of salvation.

“It was revealed to Abba Anthony in his desert that there was one in the city who was his equal. He was a doctor by profession, and whatever he had beyond his needs he gave to the poor and every day he sang the Sanctus with the angels.”

- *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*

- “Just start giving to something, no matter how small... If you do so, God will bless you, and He will increase your efforts.”
- We must do this face-to-face and not look away from those suffering like Levite and priest.
- We must touch and interact with those suffering and poor.
- Get away from being self-centered
- Start small!

### **Talent and Passions**

“Abba Agathon said, ‘If I could meet a leper, give him my body and take his, I should be very happy.’ That is true love indeed.”

- *Sayings of the Desert Fathers, Agathon 26*

- Practically: apply our talents and capabilities to helping and serving others; identify a need where we have a strength.
- Here we can think beyond feeding. What other things are needed?
- Each of us has a gift, meant to be used toward God and the other; each of us unique and uniquely called to serve and to offer ourselves

“<sup>4</sup>“Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord *is* one! <sup>5</sup> You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength.”

- *Deuteronomy 6:4-5*

- We can do this quietly too: consider St Nektarios of Aegina cleaning the toilets.
- Being successful here is not required of us, only obedience.
- Love of neighbor is our salvation. It is the imitation of God- greater even than prayer!

“It can happen that when we are at prayer, some brothers come to see us. Then we have to choose, either to interrupt our prayer or to sadden our brother by refusing to answer him. But love is greater than prayer. Prayer is one virtue amongst others, whereas love contains them all.”

- John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, 26<sup>th</sup> Step

“A brother said to one of the elders, ‘Here are two brothers. One never leaves his cell where he prays, fasts for six days at a time, and gives himself up to all sorts of mortification. The other looks after the sick. Which of the two lives a life more pleasing to God?’

The elder replied, ‘The brother who fasts for six days on end would not be the equal of the one who looks after the sick, not even if he hanged himself by the nose.’”

- Sayings of the Desert Fathers, *Anonymous Series*, 224

## **Toxic Charity**

- Beware of excuses. We cannot overlook the command to do acts of mercy.
- Philanthropy, charity, etc. must be done in love:

“<sup>21</sup>“Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. <sup>22</sup> Many will say to Me in that day, ‘Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?’ <sup>23</sup> And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!’”

- *The Gospel According to St. Matthew 7:21-23*

”If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. <sup>2</sup> If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. <sup>3</sup> If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.”

- *I Corinthians 13:1-3*