

Almsgiving

Deuteronomy 24:17-22; 2 Thessalonians 3:6-15; Matthew 6:1-4

“What do you have that you did not receive?” (1 Corinthians 4:7)

Paul is admonishing the Corinthians because they are making a mockery of the Lord's Supper and of the poor. Our Lord instituted His Supper in the midst of a Paschal meal. And He instituted it near the end of the meal. I am very thankful for the Corinthians. They are a poor example in one way because of their abuse of the Lord's Supper and their abuse of the poor. But Paul's correction of them is good instruction for us. We love to add unnecessary rituals. The Baptismal rite was becoming quite a mess before Luther cleaned it up. And we have a much cleaner, and I would argue, clearer, rite of Baptism. Every Maundy Thursday, well intentioned Christians want to recreate the Paschal meal and the footwashing. The Paschal meal was a shadow of the thing to come. Why would we focus on the shadow? The foot washing is a great example of why you shouldn't do children's sermons. Sadly, 99% of children's sermons are object lessons. And children and adults alike remember the object, but not the lesson. The foot washing was an object lesson. If Christ humiliated Himself to serve us out of love for us, how much more should we be willing to humiliate ourselves and serve others in love. Anyway, we love to add unnecessary ceremony, don't we. The Corinthians added the Paschal meal to every Sunday.

Could you imagine doing a Paschal meal every Sunday? This is, in effect, what the Corinthians seem to be doing. Everyone who could would bring bread and wine. Some of it would be set aside for the Lord's Supper. The rest would be eaten as part of a Paschal-type meal. The rich would feast and the poor would eat the scraps. Can you imagine that scene? The rich were accustomed to being callous and the poor were used to being mistreated. Paul reminds them, “What do you have that you did not receive?”

The rich and well-off of all times easily fall into the trap that they earned their riches. As Paul reminds the Thessalonians, we should be warned against idleness and commended for working hard. But this doesn't mean that you earn excess.

The skills and drive and opportunities you had or continue to have are gracious gifts of the Lord. What do you have that you didn't receive? The poor are cared for by God. You constantly hear about God's concern for the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow in the Old Testament. These were the poor people in the Old Testament. God allows them to be poor. Sure, some get there by their own idleness or demons they suffer from, but they are there with God's permission. There's two great general prayers in the hymnal that I use on shut-in visits as the general prayer. One of them says this: "Grant that we may with faithful perseverance receive from You our sorrows as well as our joys, knowing that health and sickness, riches and poverty, and all things come by permission of your Fatherly hand." (LSB 309) That's a hard prayer to say and actually mean it. Our sorrows? Really, Lord? The rich of Corinth treat the poor as if they deserve what they have gotten in life. Yet what have the rich gotten that they haven't received?

Paul needs to remind them and us that all believers in Christ are equal. Rulers are not equal. Some rule well and others rule poorly. Those who rule well are worthy of praise. Those who rule poorly are worthy of criticism. But all Christians, no matter their station or standing in life, are equally worthy before God in Christ.

Please notice here that Paul is talking about believers when he's talking about sharing with those less fortunate and shunning the idle. I will grant you that it is a complex problem with how best to take care of the poor in our society. The right mix of compassion and suffering the consequences of your decisions is a hard one to get right. I can definitely say that what California is doing isn't working and needs to be changed. But I have no silver bullet. As Jesus says, we will always have the poor with us. (Matthew 26:11) As a society, we will continue to struggle with how best to truly help the poor. But Paul isn't talking about unbelievers. He's talking about how believers treat each other. Jesus says that they will know us by how we love one another. (John 13:35) And the Corinthians aren't acting very loving towards their poor.

God set up standards in the Old Testament. You weren't to harvest your fields or fruit trees or vines completely.

You would leave about 10% unharvested so the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow could glean from the remainder and feed themselves. You'll probably remember this is how Ruth caught the eye of Boaz. And out of their union comes King David, and more importantly, Jesus.

It was the practice of the rich in the New Testament to bring bread and wine to the Divine Service. Some would be set aside for the Lord's Supper. The rest would be distributed to the poor, especially widows of the congregation, along with the Lord's Supper. You'll recall from Acts that deacons were needed to help distribute this bread and wine to the widows.

From the Old Testament instruction and New Testament instruction and example, we are to set aside some of what we have received for those who are in need in the congregation. This would also include food and clothing and the like to the community we live in. Far too often, we reflect the attitude of the well off in our culture whose solution is to just throw money at a problem. You should rarely give money to the poor. Take them to a meal somewhere. Give them clothing or other provisions as you are able. Give as you are moved. I heard a great suggestion by another pastor. Give to your church. 10% is a good starting point. Whatever else you give in your life is up to your discretion. When someone asks you to give money, maybe you'll be moved to help them in some way. When someone else asks you to give money, you can refrain with a clean conscience.

There are two improper attitudes when it comes to almsgiving. One is to not give at all. We cannot maintain this attitude. What do you have that you haven't received? The other is to make a great fanfare of your giving. Jesus directly prohibits us from doing this. He knows our weakness and what a great temptation to the sin of pride this would be. Rest assured that your Father sees your not giving and your giving and will reward you appropriately.

Peter reminds us that we are sojourners on this earth. (I Peter 2:11) Peter does this to remind us to fight against sinful urges that attack us all the time. But it's also a helpful reminder that we take nothing with us from this earth. Stuff is just stuff. If it doesn't pass through the belly to be expelled, it will be consumed by fire on the last day. It's just stuff.

How many of us spend time, money, and energy on acquiring stuff that just doesn't matter?

We see this in nursing homes most of all. There's very little room in a nursing home room for your own stuff. Sadly, they make room for a tv to try and keep you quiet and distracted from your misery. I have some experience with nursing homes. From my experience, I can say that most people that go into them either don't plan to stay in them or it happened to them against their will due to either poor health or family not willing to take care of their loved ones. It's very sad. And once you're in there, you have very little to no control over your own resources. It's very sad, but a good reminder to us that we can take nothing with us. Why do we waste so much time, money, and energy on stuff that really doesn't matter. There's a great commercial out there that makes this point to get you to spend money on experiences instead of stuff. Yeah, they just want your money, but it's a clever advertisement. Yet, the harsh reality for most of us is that we won't even keep many of our memories besides all the stuff we cannot take with us.

So, what *is* important to invest our time, money, and energy in? The one thing that will be present in all eternity: other people. It has been my experience, as limited as it is, that people never miss stuff nor do they miss experiences they didn't have on their deathbed. What they regret is not spending time with family and friends. What they come to find out is that the important thing in life is other people, especially Jesus. Whether they believe in Jesus or not, they will meet Him. He will either be Judge to them or Savior to them. The Christian knows the comfort of Jesus as their savior. Our prayer on our deathbed, is that we will remain confident with our trust in Jesus.

This lent, we've looked at the spiritual disciplines of prayer, fasting and almsgiving. These are the ones that Jesus expects from you. I saw an advertisement the other day for an online Bible study on Christian spiritual disciplines and it had something like 7 of them. That's crazy. To be fair, Bible reading was one of them and we are commanded to do that, but 7? Jesus expects you to participate in the spiritual disciplines of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. And not just during lent. The Didache, which is an early Christian document written before 100 AD, directed Christians to fast on every Wednesday and Friday.

They didn't want to fast on Mondays and Thursdays because the hypocrites, also known as the Jews, fasted on those days, but they did prescribe fasting as a normal part of Christian life. I'm not saying you have to fast for two days every week, but some form of fasting should be a regular part of your life. As well as prayer and almsgiving.

Prayer keeps you in the Word of God and looking to God for all good and in times of all need. This is the daily habit of the Christian. Imagine how mad you would be if people in your house, either your spouse or children or parents, didn't talk to you every day? How much more should we talk to our heavenly Father?

Fasting keeps you humble, in good fighting shape, and helps to curb the old sinful Adam. This is especially important in our culture which is really a culture of excess. This will maximize your ability to serve your neighbor in love.

Almsgiving keeps you mindful of others and helps to fight the temptation of worshipping mammon. Again, this is especially important in our culture which worships material things and excess. Your almsgiving will actually provide good for your neighbor.

And yes, of course, you should hear, read, mark, learn, and take to heart the Word of God daily. If you want to call it a spiritual discipline, that's fine.

We don't gain salvation by any of these spiritual disciplines. They do help us live a more fulfilling Christian life, but they aren't the source of that life. Only Christ is. By receiving His good gifts of Word and Sacrament, we are prepared to live in a sin-stained world. And by living in Christ and dying in Christ, we show a hopeless world who to look to for true hope: our Lord Jesus Christ.

May God richly bless you this upcoming Holy Week as you meditate upon the passion of Our Lord.

In Jesus' name. Amen.