Treatise 8. On Works and Alms

Cyprian of Carthage (c. AD 200–258)

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Treatise 8. On Works and Alms

Argument.-He Powerfully Exhorts to the Manifestation of Faith by Works, and Enforces the Wisdom of Offerings to the Church and of Bounty to the Poor as the Best Investment of a Christian's Estate. This He Proves Out of Many Scriptures.

1. Many and great, beloved brethren, are the divine benefits wherewith the large and abundant mercy of God the Father and Christ both has laboured and is always labouring for our salvation: that the Father sent the Son to preserve us and give us life, in order that He might restore us; and that the Son was willing to be sent and to become the Son of man, that He might make us sons of God; humbled Himself, that He might raise up the people who before were prostrate; was wounded that He might heal our wounds; served, that He might draw out to liberty those who were in bondage; underwent death, that He might set forth immortality to mortals. These are many and great boons of divine compassion. But, moreover, what is that providence, and how great the clemency, that by a plan of salvation it is provided for us, that more abundant care should be taken for preserving man after he is already redeemed! For when the Lord at His advent had cured those wounds which Adam had borne, and had healed the old poisons of the serpent, He gave a law to the sound man and bade him sin no more, lest a worse thing should befall the sinner. We had been limited and shut up into a narrow space by the commandment of innocence. Nor would the infirmity and weakness of human frailty have any resource, unless the divine mercy, coming once more in aid, should open some way of securing salvation by pointing out works of justice and mercy, so that by almsgiving we may wash away whatever foulness we subsequently contract.

2. The Holy Spirit speaks in the sacred Scriptures, and says, "By almsgiving and faith sins are purged." Not assuredly those sins which had been previously contracted, for those are purged by the blood and sanctification of Christ. Moreover, He says again, "As water extinguisheth fire, so almsgiving quencheth sin." Here also it is shown and proved, that as in the layer of saving water the fire of Gehenna is extinguished, so by almsgiving and works of righteousness the flame of sins is subdued. And because in baptism remission of sins is granted once for all, constant and ceaseless labour, following the likeness of baptism, once again bestows the mercy of God. The Lord teaches this also in the Gospel. For when the disciples were pointed out, as eating and not first washing their hands, He replied and said, "He that made that which is within, made also that which is without. But give alms, and

behold all things are clean unto you; " teaching hereby and showing, that not the hands are to be washed, but the heart, and that the foulness from inside is to be done away rather than that from outside; but that he who shall have cleansed what is within has cleansed also that which is without; and that if the mind is cleansed, a man has begun to be clean also in skin and body. Further, admonishing, and showing whence we may be clean and purged, He added that alms must be given. He who is pitiful teaches and warns us that pity must be shown; and because He seeks to save those whom at a great cost He has redeemed, He teaches that those who, after the grace of baptism, have become foul, may once more be cleansed.

3. Let us then acknowledge, beloved brethren, the wholesome gift of the divine mercy; and let us, who cannot be without some wound of conscience, heal our wounds by the spiritual remedies for the cleansing and purging of our sins. Nor let any one so flatter himself with the notion of a pure and immaculate heart, as, in dependence on his own innocence, to think that the medicine needs not to be applied to his wounds; since it is written, "Who shall boast that he hath a clean heart, or who shall boast that he is pure from sins? " And again, in his epistle, John lays it down, and says, "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us." But if no one can be without sin, and whoever should say that he is without fault is either proud or foolish, how needful, how kind is the divine mercy, which, knowing that there are still found some wounds in those that have been healed, even after their healing, has given wholesome remedies for the curing and healing of their wounds anew!

4. Finally, beloved brethren, the divine admonition in the Scriptures, as well old as new, has never failed, has never been silent in urging God's people always and everywhere to works of mercy; and in the strain and exhortation of the Holy Spirit, every one who is instructed into the hope of the heavenly kingdom is commanded to give alms. God commands and prescribes to Isaiah: "Cry," says He, "with strength, and spare not. Lift up thy voice as a trumpet, and declare to my people their transgressions, and to the house of Jacob their sins." And when He had commanded their sins to be charged upon them, and with the full force of His indignation had set forth their iniquities, and had said, that not even though they should use supplications, and prayers, and fastings, should they be able to make atonement for their sins; nor, if they were clothed in sackcloth and ashes, be able to soften God's anger, yet in the last part showing that God can be appeased by almsgiving alone, he added, saying, "Break thy bread to the hungry, and bring the poor that are without a home into thy house. If thou seest the naked, clothe him; and despise not the household of thine own seed. Then shall thy light break forth in season, and thy garments shall arise speedily; and righteousness shall go before thee, and the glory of God shall surround thee. Then shalt thou cry, and God shall hear thee; whilst yet thou art speaking, He shall say, Here I am."

5. The remedies for propitiating God are given in the words of God Himself; the divine instructions have taught what sinners ought to do, that by works of righteousness God is satisfied, that with the deserts of mercy sins are cleansed. And in Solomon we read,

"Shut up alms in the heart of the poor, and these shall intercede for thee from all evil. And again: "Whoso stoppeth his ears that he may not hear the weak, he also shall call upon God, and there will be none to hear him. For he shall not be able to deserve the mercy of the Lord, who himself shall not have been merciful; nor shall he obtain aught from the divine pity in his prayers, who shall not have been humane towards the poor man's prayer. And this also the Holy Spirit declares in the Psalms, and proves, saying, Blessed is he that considereth of the poor and needy; the Lord will deliver him in the evil day. Remembering which precepts, Daniel, when king Nebuchodonosor was in anxiety, being frightened by an adverse dream, gave him, for the turning away of evils, a remedy to obtain the divine help, saying, "Wherefore, O king, let my counsel be acceptable to thee; and redeem thy sins by almsgivings, and thine unrighteousness by mercies to the poor, and God will be patient to thy sins.

And as the king did not obey him, he underwent the misfortunes and mischiefs which he had seen, and which he might have escaped and avoided had he redeemed his sins by almsgiving. Raphael the angel also witnesses the like, and exhorts that alms should be freely and liberally bestowed, saying, "Prayer is good, with fasting and alms; because alms doth deliver from death, and it purgeth away sins. He shows that our prayers and fastings are of less avail, unless they are aided by almsgiving; that entreaties alone are of little force to obtain what they seek, unless they be made sufficient by the addition of deeds and good works. The angel reveals, and manifests, and certifies that our petitions become efficacious by almsgiving, that life is redeemed from dangers by almsgiving, that souls are delivered from death by almsgiving.

6. Neither, beloved brethren, are we so bringing forward these things, as that we should not prove what Raphael the angel said, by the testimony of the truth. In the Acts of the Apostles the faith of the fact is established; and that souls are delivered by almsgiving not only from the second, but from the first death, is discovered by the evidence of a matter accomplished and completed. When Tabitha, being greatly given to good works and to bestowing alms, fell sick and died, Peter was summoned to her lifeless body; and when he, with apostolic humanity, had come in haste, there stood around him widows weeping and entreating, showing the cloaks, and coats, and all the garments which they had previously received, and praying for the deceased not by their words, but by her own deeds. Peter felt that what was asked in such a way might be obtained, and that Christ's aid would not be wanting to the petitioners, since He Himself was clothed in the clothing of the widows. When, therefore, falling on his knees, he had prayed, and-fit advocate for the widows and poor-had brought to the Lord the prayers entrusted to him, turning to the body, which was now lying washed on the bier, he said, "Tabitha, in the name of Jesus Christ, arise!" Nor did He fail to bring aid to Peter, who had said in the Gospel, that whatever should be asked in His name should be given. Therefore death is suspended, and the spirit is restored, and, to the marvel and astonishment of all, the revived body is quickened into this worldly light once more; so effectual were the merits of mercy, so much did righteous works avail! She

who had conferred upon suffering widows the help needful to live, deserved to be recalled to life by the widows' petition.

7. Therefore in the Gospel, the Lord, the Teacher of our life and Master of eternal salvation, quickening the assembly of believers, and providing for them for ever when quickened, among His divine commands and precepts of heaven, commands and prescribes nothing more frequently than that we should devote ourselves to almsgiving, and not depend on earthly possessions, but rather lay up heavenly treasures. "Sell," says He, "your goods, and give alms." And again: "Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon the earth, where moth and rust do corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal. But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal. For where thy treasure is, there will thy heart be also." And when He wished to set forth a man perfect and complete by the observation of the law, He said, "If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven; and come and follow me." Moreover, in another place He says that a merchant of the heavenly grace, and a gainer of eternal salvation, ought to purchase the precious pearl-that is, eternal life-at the price of the blood of Christ, from the amount of his patrimony, parting with all his wealth for it. He says: "The kingdom of heaven is like unto a merchantman seeking goodly pearls. And when he found a precious pearl, he went away and sold all that he had, and bought it."

8. In fine, He calls those the children of Abraham whom He sees to be laborious in aiding and nourishing the poor. For when Zacchaeus said, "Behold, the half of my goods I give to the poor; and if I have done any wrong to any man, I restore fourfold," Jesus answered and said, "That salvation has this day come to this house, for that he also is a son of Abraham." For if Abraham believed in God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness, certainly he who gives alms according to God's precept believes in God, and he who has the truth of faith maintains the fear of God; moreover, he who maintains the fear of God considers God in showing mercy to the poor. For he labours thus because he believes-because he knows that what is foretold by God's word is true, and that the Holy Scripture cannot lie-that unfruitful trees, that is, unproductive men, are cut off and cast into the fire, but that the merciful are called into the kingdom. He also, in another place, calls laborious and fruitful men faithful; but He denies faith to unfruitful and barren ones, saying, "If ye have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, who will commit to you that which is true? And if ye have not been faithful in that which is another man's, who shall give you that which is your own? "

9. If you dread and fear, lest, if you begin to act thus abundantly, your patrimony being exhausted with your liberal dealing, you may perchance be reduced to poverty; be of good courage in this respect, be free from care: that cannot be exhausted whence the service of Christ is supplied, whence the heavenly work is celebrated. Neither do I vouch for this on my own authority; but I promise it on the faith of the Holy Scriptures, and on the authority of the divine promise. The Holy Spirit speaks by Solomon, and says, "He that giveth unto the

poor shall never lack, but he that turneth away his eye shall be in great poverty; " showing that the merciful and those who do good works cannot want, but rather that the sparing and barren hereafter come to want. Moreover, the blessed Apostle Paul, full of the grace of the Lord's inspiration, says: "He that ministereth seed to the sower, shall both minister bread for your food, and shall multiply your seed sown, and shall increase the growth of the fruits of your righteousness, that in all things ye may be enriched. And again: "The administration of this service shall not only supply the wants of the saints, but shall be abundant also by many thanksgivings unto God; " because, while thanks are directed to God for our almsgivings and labours, by the prayer of the poor, the wealth of the doer is increased by the retribution of God.

And the Lord in the Gospel, already considering the hearts of men of this kind, and with prescient voice denouncing faithless and unbelieving men, bears witness, and says: "Take no thought, saying, What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink? or, Wherewithal shall we be clothed? For these things the Gentiles seek. And your Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things. Seek first the kingdom of God, and His righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you. He says that all these things shall be added and given to them who seek the kingdom and righteousness of God. For the Lord says, that when the day of judgment shall come, those who have laboured in His Church are admitted to receive the kingdom.

10. You are afraid lest perchance your estate should fail, if you begin to act liberally from it; and you do not know, miserable man that you are, that while you are fearing lest your family property should fail you, life itself, and salvation, are failing; and whilst you are anxious lest any of your wealth should be diminished, you do not see that you yourself are being diminished, in that you are a lover of mammon more than of your own soul; and while you fear, lest for the sake of yourself, you should lose your patrimony, you yourself are perishing for the sake of your patrimony. And therefore the apostle well exclaims, and says: "We brought nothing into this world, neither indeed can we carry anything out. Therefore, having food and clothing, let us therewith be content. For they who will be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many and hurtful desires, which drown a man in perdition and in destruction. For covetousness is a root of all evils, which some desiring, have made shipwreck from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows."

11. Are you afraid that your patrimony perchance may fall short, if you should begin to do liberally from it? Yet when has it ever happened that resources could fail the righteous man, since it is written, "The Lord will not slay with famine the righteous soul? " Elias in the desert is fed by the ministry of ravens; and a meal from heaven is made ready for Daniel in the den, when shut up by the king's command for a prey to the lions; and you are afraid that food should be wanting to you, labouring and deserving well of the Lord, although He Himself in the Gospel bears witness, for the rebuke of those whose mind is doubtful and faith small, and says: "Behold the fowls of heaven, that they sow not, nor reap, nor gather into barns; and your heavenly Father feedeth them: are you not of more value than they?

" God feeds the fowls, and daily food is afforded to the sparrows; and to creatures which have no sense of things divine there is no want of drink or food. Thinkest thou that to a Christian-thinkest thou that to a servant of the Lord-thinkest thou that to one given up to good works-thinkest thou that to one that is dear to his Lord, anything will be wanting?

12. Unless you imagine that he who feeds Christ is not himself fed by Christ, or that earthly things will be wanting to those to whom heavenly and divine things are given, whence this unbelieving thought, whence this impious and sacrilegious consideration? What does a faithless heart do in the home of faith? Why is he who does not altogether trust in Christ named and called a Christian? The name of Pharisee is more fitting for you. For when in the Gospel the Lord was discoursing concerning almsgiving, and faithfully and wholesomely warned us to make to ourselves friends of our earthly lucre by provident good works, who might afterwards receive us into eternal dwellings, the Scripture added after this, and said, "But the Pharisees heard all these things, who were very covetous, and they derided Him." Some suchlike we see now in the Church, whose closed ears and darkened hearts admit no light from spiritual and saving warnings, of whom we need not wonder that they contemn the servant in his discourses, when we see the Lord Himself despised by such.

13. Wherefore do you applaud yourself in those vain and silly conceits, as if you were withheld from good works by fear and solicitude for the future? Why do you lay out before you certain shadows and omens of a vain excuse? Yea, confess what is the truth; and since you cannot deceive those who know, utter forth the secret and hidden things of your mind. The gloom of barrenness has besieged your mind; and while the light of truth has departed thence, the deep and profound darkness of avarice has blinded your carnal heart. You are the captive and slave of your money; you are bound with the chains and bonds of covetousness; and you whom Christ had once loosed, are once more in chains. You keep your money, which, when kept, does not keep you. You heap up a patrimony which burdens your with its weight; and you do not remember what God answered to the rich man, who boasted with a foolish exultation of the abundance of his exuberant harvest: "Thou fool," said He, "this night thy soul is required of thee; then whose shall those things be which thou hast provided? " Why do you watch in loneliness over your riches? why for your punishment do you heap up the burden of your patrimony, that, in proportion as you are rich in this world, you may become poor to God? Divide your returns with the Lord your God; share your gains with Christ; make Christ a partner with you in your earthly possessions, that He also may make you a fellow-heir with Him in His heavenly kingdom.

14. You are mistaken, and are deceived, whosoever you are, that think yourself rich in this world. Listen to the voice of your Lord in the Apocalypse, rebuking men of your stamp with righteous reproaches: "Thou sayest," says He, "I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked. I counsel thee to buy of me gold tried in the fire, that thou mayest be rich; and white raiment, that thou mayest be clothed, and that the shame of thy nakedness may not appear in thee; and anoint thine eyes with eye-salve, that thou mayest see." You

therefore, who are rich and wealthy, buy for yourself of Christ gold tried by fire; that you may be pure gold, with your filth burnt out as if by fire, if you are purged by almsgiving and righteous works. Buy for yourself white raiment, that you who had been naked according to Adam, and were before frightful and unseemly, may be clothed with the white garment of Christ. And you who are a wealthy and rich matron in Christ's Church, anoint your eyes, not with the collyrium of the devil, but with Christ's eye-salve, that you may be able to attain to see God, by deserving well of God, both by good works and character.

15. But you who are such as this, cannot labour in the Church. For your eyes, overcast with the gloom of blackness, and shadowed in night, do not see the needy and poor. You are wealthy and rich, and do you think that you celebrate the Lord's Supper, not at all considering the offering, who come to the Lord's Supper Without a sacrifice, and yet take part of the sacrifice which the poor man has offered? Consider in the Gospel the widow that remembered the heavenly precepts, doing good even amidst the difficulties and straits of poverty, casting two mites, which were all that she had, into the treasury; whom when the Lord observed and saw, regarding her work not for its abundance, but for its intention, and considering not how much, but from how much, she had given, He answered and said, "Verily I say unto you, that that widow hath cast in more than they all into the offerings of God. For all these have, of that which they had in abundance, cast in unto the offerings of God; but she of her penury hath cast in all the living that she had," Greatly blessed and glorious woman, who even before the day of judgment hast merited to be praised by the voice of the Judge! Let the rich be ashamed of their barrenness and unbelief. The widow, the widow needy in means, is found rich in works.

And although everything that is given is conferred upon widows and orphans, she gives, whom it behoved to receive, that we may know thence what punishment, awaits the barren rich man, when by this very instance even the poor ought to labour in good works. And in order that we may understand that their labours are given to God, and that whoever performs them deserves well of the Lord, Christ calls this "the offerings of God," and intimates that the widow has cast in two farthings into the offerings of God, that it may be more abundantly evident that he who hath pity on the poor lendeth to God.

16. But neither let the consideration, dearest brethren, restrain and recall the Christian from good and righteous works, that any one should fancy that he could be excused for the benefit of his children; since in spiritual expenditure we ought to think of Christ, who has declared that He receives them; and not prefer our fellow-servants, but the Lord, to our children, since He Himself instructs and warns us, saying, "He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and he that loveth son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me." Also in Deuteronomy, for the strengthening of faith and the love of God, similar things are written: "Who say," he saith, "unto their father or mother, I have not known thee; neither did they acknowledge their children, these have observed Thy words, and kept Thy covenant." For if we love God with our whole heart, we ought not to prefer either our parents or children to God. And this also John lays down in his epistle, that the

love of God is not in them whom we see unwilling to labour for the poor. "Whoso," says he, "hath this world's goods, and seeth his brother have need, and shutteth up his bowels from him, how dwelleth the love of God in him? " For if by almsgiving to the poor we are lending to God-and when it is given to the least it is given to Christ-there is no ground for any one preferring earthly things to heavenly, nor for considering human things before divine.

17. Thus that widow in the third book of Kings, when in the drought and famine, having consumed everything, she had made of the little meal and oil which was left, a cake upon the ashes, and, having used this, was about to die with her children, Elias came and asked that something should first be given him to eat, and then of what remained that she and her children should eat. Nor did she hesitate to obey; nor did the mother prefer her children to Elias in her hunger and poverty. Yea, there is done in God's sight a thing that pleases God: promptly and liberally is presented what is asked for, Neither is it a portion out of abundance, but the whole out of a little, that is given, and another is fed before her hungry children; nor in penury and want is food thought of before mercy; so that while in a saving work the life according to the flesh is contemned, the soul according to the spirit is preserved. Therefore Elias, being the type of Christ, and showing that according to His mercy He returns to each their reward, answered and said: "Thus saith the Lord, The vessel of meal shall not fail, and the cruse of oil shall not be diminished, until the day that the Lord giveth rain upon the earth. According to her faith in the divine promise, those things which she gave were multiplied and heaped up to the widow;

and her righteous works and deserts of mercy taking augmentations and increase, the vessels of meal and oil were filled. Nor did the mother take away from her children what she gave to Elias, but rather she conferred upon her children what she did kindly and piously. And she did not as yet know Christ; she had not yet heard His precepts; she did not, as redeemed by His cross and passion, repay meat and drink for His blood. So that from this it may appear how much he sins in the Church, who, preferring himself and his children to Christ, preserves his wealth, and does not share an abundant estate with the poverty of the needy.

18. Moreover, also, (you say) there are many children at home; and the multitude of your children checks yon from giving yourself freely to good works. And yet on this very account you ought to labour the more, for the reason that you are the father of many pledges. There are the more for whom you must beseech the Lord. The sins of many have to be redeemed, the consciences of many to be cleansed, the souls of many to be liberated. As in this worldly life, in the nourishment and bringing up of children, the larger the number the greater also is the expense; so also in the spiritual and heavenly life, the larger the number of children you have, the greater ought to be the outlay of your labours. Thus also Job offered numerous sacrifices on behalf of his children; and as large as was the number of the pledges in his home, so large also was the number of victims given to God. And since there cannot daily fail to be sins committed in the sight of God, there wanted not daily sacrifices wherewith the sins might be cleansed away. The Holy Scripture proves this, saying: "Job, a true and righteous

man, had seven sons and three daughters, and cleansed them, offering for them victims to God according to the number of them, and for their sins one calf." If, then, you truly love your children, if you show to them the full and paternal sweetness of love, you ought to be the more charitable, that by your righteous works you may commend your children to God.

19. Neither should you think that he is father to your children who is both changeable and infirm, but you should obtain Him who is the eternal and unchanging Father of spiritual children. Assign to Him your wealth which you are saving up for your heirs. Let Him be the guardian for your children; let Him be their trustee; let Him be their protector, by His divine majesty, against all worldly injuries. The state neither takes away the property entrusted to God, nor does the exchequer intrude on it, nor does any forensic calumny overthrow it. That inheritance is placed in security which is kept under the guardianship of God. This is to provide for one's dear pledges for the coming time; this is with paternal affection to take care for one's future heirs, according to the faith of the Holy Scripture, which says: "I have been young, and now am old; yet have I not seen the righteous forsaken, nor his seed wanting bread. All the day long he is merciful, and lendeth; and his seed is blessed." And again: "He who walketh without reproach in his integrity shall leave blessed children after him." Therefore you are an unfair and traitorous father, unless you faithfully consult for your children, unless yon look forward to preserve them in religion and true piety. You who are careful rather for their earthly than for their heavenly estate, rather to commend your children to the devil than to Christ, are sinning twice, and allowing a double and twofold crime, both in not providing for your children the aid of God their Father, and in teaching your children to love their property more than Christ.

20. Be rather such a father to your children as was Tobias. Give useful and saving precepts to your pledges, such as he gave to his son; command your children what he also commanded his son, saying: "And now, my son, I command thee, serve God in truth, and do before Him that which pleaseth Him; and command thy sons, that they exercise righteousness and alms, and be mindful of God, and bless His name always." And again: "All the days of thy life, most dear son, have God in your mind, and be not willing to transgress His commandments. Do righteousness all the days of thy life, and be not willing to walk in the way of iniquity; because if thou deal truly, there will be respect of thy works. Give alms of thy substance, and turn not away thy face from any poor man. So shall it be, that neither shall the face of God be turned away from thee. As thou hast, my son, so do. If thy substance is abundant, give alms of it the more. If thou hast little, communicate of that little. And fear not when thou doest alms; for thou layest up a good reward for thyself against the day of necessity, because that alms do deliver from death, and suffereth not to come into Gehenna. Alms is a good gift to all that give it, in the sight of the most high God."

21. What sort of gift is it, beloved brethren, whose setting forth is celebrated in the sight of God? If, in a gift of the Gentiles, it seems a great and glorious thing to have proconsuls or emperors present, and the preparation and display is the greater among the givers, in order that they may please the higher classes; how much more illustrious and greater is

the glory to have God and Christ as the spectators of the gift! How much more sumptuous the preparation and more liberal the expense to be set forth in that case, when the powers of heaven assemble to the spectacle, when all the angels come together: where it is not a four-horsed chariot or a consulship that is sought for the giver, but life eternal is bestowed; nor is the empty and fleeting favour of the rabble grasped at, but the perpetual reward of the kingdom of heaven is received!

22. And that the indolent and the barren, and those, who by their covetousness for money do nothing in respect of the fruit of their salvation, may be the more ashamed, and that the blush of dishonour and disgrace may the more strike upon their sordid conscience, let each one place before his eyes the devil with his servants, that is, with the people of perdition and death, springing forth into the midst, and provoking the people of Christ with the trial of comparison-Christ Himself being present, and judging-in these words: "I, for those whom thou seest with me, neither received buffets, nor bore scourgings, nor endured the cross, nor shed my blood, nor redeemed my family at the price of my suffering and blood; but neither do I promise them a celestial kingdom, nor do I recall them to paradise, having again restored to them immortality. But they prepare for me gifts how precious! how large! with how excessive and tedious a labour procured! and that, with the most sumptuous devices either pledging or selling their means in the procuring of the gift! and, unless a competent manifestation followed, they are cast out with scoffings and hissings, and by the popular fury sometimes they are almost stoned!

Show, O Christ, such givers as these of Thine -those rich men, those men affluent with abounding wealth-whether in the Church wherein Thou presidest and beholdest, they set forth a gift of that kind,-having pledged or scattered their riches, yea, having transferred them, by the change of their possessions for the better, into heavenly treasures! In those spectacles of mine, perishing and earthly as they are, no one is fed, no one is clothed, no one is sustained by the comfort either of any meat or drink. All things, between the madness of the exhibitor and the mistake of the spectator, are perishing in a prodigal and foolish vanity of deceiving pleasures. There, in Thy poor, Thou art clothed and fed; Thou promisest eternal life to those who labour for Thee; and scarcely are Thy people made equal to mine that perish, although they are honoured by Thee with divine wages and heavenly rewards.

23. What do we reply to these things, dearest brethren? With what reason do we defend the minds of rich men, overwhelmed with a profane barrenness and a kind of night of gloom? With what excuse do we acquit them, seeing that we are less than the devil's servants, so as not even moderately to repay Christ for the price of His passion and blood? He has given us precepts; what His servants ought to do He has instructed us; promising a reward to those that are charitable, and threatening punishment to the unfruitful. He has set forth His sentence. He has before announced what He shall judge. What can be the excuse for the laggard? what the defence for the unfruitful? But when the servant does not do what is commanded, the Lord will do what He threatens, seeing that He says: "When the Son of man shall come in His glory, and all the angels with Him, then shall He sit in the throne

of His glory: and before Him shall be gathered all nations; and He shall separate them one from another, as a shepherd divideth his sheep from the goats: and He shall set the sheep on His right hand, but the goats on the left. Then shall the King say unto them that shall be on His right hand, Come, ye blessed of my Father, receive the kingdom that is prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was an hungered, and ye gave me to eat:

I was thirsty, and ye gave me to drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in: naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came to me. Then shall the righteous answer Him, saying, Lord, when saw we Thee an hungered, and fed Thee? thirsty, land gave Thee drink? When saw we Thee a stranger, and took Thee in? naked, and clothed Thee? Or when saw we Thee sick, and in prison, and came unto Thee? Then shall the King answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Insomuch as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, ye did it unto me. Then shall He say also unto those that shall be at His left hand, Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, which my Father hath prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was an hungered, and ye gave me not to eat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me not to drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me not in: naked, and ye clothed me not: sick, and in prison, and ye visited me not. Then shall they also answer Him, saying, Lord, when saw we Thee an hungered, or athirst, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and ministered not unto Thee?

And He shall answer them, Verily I say unto you, In so far as ye did it not to one of the least of these, ye did it not unto me. And these shall go away into everlasting burning: but the righteous into life eternal" What more could Christ declare unto us? How more could He stimulate the works of our righteousness and mercy, than by saying that whatever is given to the needy and poor is given to Himself, and by saying that He is aggrieved unless the needy and poor be supplied? So that he who in the Church is not moved by consideration for his brother, may yet be moved by contemplation of Christ; and he who does not think of his fellow-servant in suffering and in poverty, may yet think of his Lord, who abideth in that very man whom he is despising.

24. And therefore, dearest brethren, whose fear is inclined towards God, and who having already despised and trampled under foot the world, have lifted up your mind to things heavenly and divine, let us with full faith, with devoted mind, with continual labour, give our obedience, to deserve well of the Lord. Let us give to Christ earthly garments, that we may receive heavenly raiment; let us give food and drink of this world, that we may come with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob to the heavenly banquet. That we may not reap little, let us sow abundantly. Let us, while there is time, take thought for our security and eternal salvation, according to the admonition of the Apostle Paul, who says: "Therefore, while we have time, let us labour in what is good unto all men, but especially to them that are of the household of faith. But let us not be weary in well-doing, for in its season we shall reap."

25. Let us consider, beloved brethren, what the congregation of believers did in the time of the apostles, when at the first beginnings the mind flourished with greater virtues, when the faith of believers burned with a warmth of faith as yet new. Then they sold houses and

farms, and gladly and liberally presented to the apostles the proceeds to be dispensed to the poor; selling and alienating their earthly estate, they transferred their lands thither where they might receive the fruits of an eternal possession, and there prepared homes where they might begin an eternal habitation. Such, then, was the abundance in labours, as was the agreement in love, as we read in the Acts of the Apostles: "And the multitude of them that believed acted with one heart and one soul; neither was there any distinction among them, nor did they esteem anything their own of the goods which belonged to them, but they had all things common." This is truly to become sons of God by spiritual birth; this is to imitate by the heavenly law the equity of God the Father. For whatever is of God is common in our use; nor is any one excluded from His benefits and His gifts, so as to prevent the whole human race from enjoying equally the divine goodness and liberality. Thus the day equally enlightens, the sun gives radiance, the rain moistens, the wind blows, and the sleep is one to those that sleep, and the splendour of the stars and of the moon is common. In which example of equality, he who, as a possessor in the earth, shares his returns and his fruits with the fraternity, while he is common and just in his gratuitous bounties, is an imitator of God the Father.

26. What, dearest brethren, will be that glory of those who labour charitably-how great and high the joy when the Lord begins to number His people, and, distributing to our merits and good works the promised rewards, to give heavenly things for earthly, eternal things for temporal, great things for small; to present us to the Father, to whom He has restored us by His sanctification; to bestow upon us immortality and eternity, to which He has renewed us by the quickening of His blood; to bring us anew to paradise, to open the kingdom of heaven, in the faith and truth of His promise! Let these things abide firmly in our perceptions, let them be understood with full faith, let them be loved with our whole heart, let them be purchased by the magnanimity of our increasing labours. An illustrious and divine thing, dearest brethren, is the saving labour of charity; a great comfort of believers, a wholesome guard of our security, a protection of hope, a safeguard of faith, a remedy for sin, a thing placed in the power of the doer, a thing both great and easy, a crown of peace without the risk of persecution; the true and greatest gift of God, needful for the weak, glorious for the strong, assisted by which the Christian accomplishes spiritual grace, deserves well of Christ the Judge, accounts God his debtor. For this palm of works of salvation let us gladly and readily strive; let us all, in the struggle of righteousness, run with God and Christ looking on;

and let us who have already begun to be greater than this life and the world, slacken our course by no desire of this life and of this world. If the day shall find us, whether it be the day of reward or of persecution, furnished, if swift, if running in this contest of charity, the Lord will never fail of giving a reward for our merits: in peace He will give to us who conquer, a white crown for our labours; in persecution, He will accompany it with a purple one for our passion.

Source. English translation: an older public-domain translation as collected in the Writings-Database (HistoricalChristianFaith), mostly from the Ante-Nicene, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers and similar nineteenth-century editions. SermonIndex has only divided it into chapters and short sections; the wording is the translator's own. Square brackets, Greek or Latin words and footnote-free text are as the source file prints them, and a transcription error may remain. No Greek or Latin text is shown beside it yet, and no modern English version has been made.