

2nd Sunday of Lent - When You Give Alms

by Michael Flowers

The sermon emphasizes the importance of almsgiving as an expression of mercy and the need for genuine intent in our acts of righteousness.

Duration: 19:09

Topics: "Alms"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker emphasizes the importance of loving mercy, doing justly, and walking humbly with God. He encourages the audience to ask questions and take them into prayer, seeking to become more in tune with the Father's heart. The speaker references biblical stories, such as Cornelius and 2 Chronicles, to illustrate how God notices and rewards those who have a heart completely devoted to Him. The sermon also discusses the concept of meritorious almsgiving and the promises attached to a life of caring for the weak and the poor. The speaker acknowledges the challenges and fears that come with being generous and addresses the grip of greed in our lives, urging the audience to seek ways to overcome it.

Transcript

We're going to talk about almsgiving today, then and now. We're going to look at Matthew 5. We're going to consider that again, where Jesus has identified His kingdom community as the salt of the earth, the light of the world, a city, a visible city set on a hill, not to be hidden. The culture of His community is to reflect the Father's nature, loving and merciful to all who sends rain on the just and the unjust, Jesus says.

He concludes with a command to let our light shine in such a way that others may see our good works and glorify our Father in heaven. Now He's moving from the exterior to the interior life, I believe, the interior life of His community and gives a warning. Because you are the light of the world, because you have such an amazing calling on your life and identity, your purpose in this world is to shine the light of Jesus.

Because of that, chapter 6 begins, be careful not to practice your acts of righteousness before others in order to be seen by them. Is Jesus saying that we're not to be seen practicing our acts of righteousness? Or is there something else He's getting to? He's telling us not whether we give alms, whether we pray or whether we fast, but how, how to do it. Addressing our intent, really, our interior impetus, the impetus within us to give, to pray, to fast.

And so He starts out in this when He says, and when you give alms, and then when you pray and when you fast, those three things. Now, when you give alms, you is plural there. When all of you give alms.

It's interesting though, when He talks about prayer and fasting, He says when you, it's singular. We don't get that in English, right? It's singular. And so He's starting out when all of us give alms.

This is the way to do it. I think it's really interesting. It really struck me when I looked at the Greek word for alms.

There's a coffee shop over in the northeast called Elias. Anybody know what that means? Elias, it means mercy in Greek. It's a Greek word that they're using.

It's a Christian coffee shop. And we used to go there all the time when we lived in the northeast. And they have a ministry to the poor and to street folks who are over in the northeast area.

They're great folks. The word mercy is Elias. The word for alms is taken from that word Elias.

And so it means to show, when you show acts of mercy. When I discovered this, I began to hear echoes of Micah 6.8. Anybody know Micah 6.8? I bet you know it if I started. He has shown you, O man, what is good and what does the Lord require thee but to act justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with our God.

I love that passage. To do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with our God. That's what the Lord requires of us, says Micah.

To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with our God is more than just going through the motions. It's more than just raw obedience. You can't say, I love mercy, and just be in that sort of going through the motion mode.

There's something that's happened on the interior life of the person who can fully say, I love Lent. There we go. I had to say it again.

It's the second Sunday of Lent. We're just into it, right? That's right. That's right.

Something of a deep conversion has happened to that person that can say that, truly say that. To love mercy. What does it mean? What does it look like to love mercy? Wow.

I can think of people throughout the ages that I can point to who I would say, they love mercy. Lindsay was reading Acts 10. It's just an amazing passage for so many ways, but especially for New Testament Christianity, and this is right in the beginning of the gospel going forth.

Throughout Jerusalem, and now they're in Caesarea, there was a man named Cornelius, the centurion of the Italian cohort. So we have a Gentile here. The scripture says he was a devout Gentile.

He was a devout man who feared God with all of his household. What does his devotion look like? It goes on to say, he gave alms generously. Elimosune is the word from Elias.

He gave alms generously to the people and prayed constantly, prayed constantly to God, it said. So we have alms and prayer right here. I'm sure that he went through all the various fasts as well.

Well, one afternoon at about 3 o'clock, he had a vision. And that was the time of prayer, by the way, 3 o'clock. That was a Jewish time of prayer.

He was keeping the daily office, right? That's where we get the daily office is from the Jewish times of prayer. And so about 3 o'clock, he had a vision in which he clearly saw an angel of God. He stared at him in terror, and he said, What is it, Lord? Get this now, this is so significant to me.

Your prayers and your alms. There it is. Your prayers and your acts of mercy have ascended as a memorial before God.

He's not yet converted. And the Lord is seeing his heart and his lifestyle and how he's led his whole household into the rhythms of truth as he knew it up to that point. And he was seeking the one true God.

And the one true God, notice this man. Reminds me of 2 Chronicles 16, 9. The eyes of the Lord run to and fro throughout the whole earth to show himself strong on behalf of those whose hearts are completely his. God's looking for people whose hearts are completely his.

He still is. Today's psalm, Psalm 41, verse 1. We repeated it three times just to emphasize verse 1. Blessed, happy are those who regard the weak and the poor. The Lord delivers him in times of trouble.

You see there's promises attached to this kind of life. We can call this some form of meritorious almsgiving. Whereby the Lord himself rewards.

It's not according to salvation. This is like Jesus speaking about storing up treasure in heaven. This is seen in choosing and blessing the household of Cornelius.

I believe that the Lord chose Cornelius because he was devout. And because he got God's attention. It wasn't random.

He was a devout man who caught the Father's gaze. I love that image of the Father's gaze. Running throughout the whole earth to and fro.

He saw a heart that had been given over to him. So we can use that word meritorious there. Not in terms of earning one's salvation.

But in terms of what Jesus is saying. Yeah, storing up treasure in heaven. He indicates rewards.

That's what I'm trying to say. We have a hard time with this. Thinking about reward.

Right? As Protestants. Our chief concern is God's praise over us. Well done.

Good and faithful servant. Let's think about merciful actions or almsgiving. Charitable giving in the time of Jesus was embedded in social networks.

Or relationships of reciprocity. Today in the Western world we have something called charity. Where you can give generously through an organization.

And provide material assistance to those in need. But no real relationship is developed with those who benefit from our assistance. What's different about that.

And the context where Jesus is living in Roman antiquity. Those types of charitable transactions were much more deeply embedded in relationships. And those relationships tended to be much more reciprocal.

Than most charitable relationships are today. The human contact there versus anonymous giving today. Is something worth pondering for us in working out.

There are situations where it's good to give anonymously. But it's not the only way. And it's not in the context of the culture that Jesus is living in.

Regarding wealth distribution and resource distribution in the ancient world. In Greco-Roman antiquity. Poverty was a way of life.

And a way of death. Statistics run as high as 90% or more. Of the population lived at near below subsistence level.

90% or more. It's so hard to get our head around this as Americans. This is the context for the earliest followers of Jesus.

So among those who gave and those who received. The idea was that those who gave would soon be receivers. And those who received would soon be givers.

There's a sense of dignity about that. Anytime you see a one another command. It's reciprocal.

It's love one another. That's not one way love. That's a reciprocal pronoun.

We read that as love one another is a one way transaction. But it's really not. That's not the grammar.

It's I love you and you love me. And how does it feel when it's not returned? We know that. We know how it feels.

There's something missing in the lack of circularity in that kind of love. And we soon stop. Because we get the message.

There's something missing here. And it's not that we're supposed to get stuff back. From the way that we give and all of that.

I don't think it's done in that motive. That's not it. But there's something about relationship that has that circularity in it.

And a good relationship is not one way. Even with the poor. It's not the best to have a one way relationship.

And it does very little for the poor, really. It doesn't include them in a way that builds a relationship. And a sense of care and concern.

Because the gospel, a fact of the gospel, Paul is saying, is that there is no longer male nor female. Slave nor free. Right? All of these barriers have been broken down in Jesus.

They're very, very hard to stay down and keep down. It's really a modern western invention. Theologically emphasized in Luther, really.

That true gift giving should be purely one way. With no reciprocity. No expectation of return.

And this is brought out in John Barclay's book, Paul and the Gift. He points out that beginning with Martin Luther, the non-circularity, I like that, the non-circularity of the gift is perfected. For a gift to be a true gift, there can be no return or recompense.

And David Dowd's points out in his book called Alms. It's a great book. Goes up through charitable giving through the third century.

First through the third century. He points out that that sort of non-circularity is not how gift giving worked in Roman antiquity. What does this imply for us? I think we should do the work and revisit implications about charitable giving.

Impersonalized and cut off from any relational development. It costs more than writing out a check. It costs a lot.

And sometimes charitable giving involves no monetary transaction at all. It means being there. Yeah? It means being truly one with the other.

In order for that to happen, class distinctions and intellectual distinctions and all of these things that tend to create our homogeneous cultures of connection. Those things have to be rewired. Because there's a sense of shame sometimes that we have to pass through.

Right? Fear. Insecurity. Absolutely.

We just don't know how to do this well. But we can learn. We can learn.

I don't know how to do this well. Liz and I are asking these questions right now. We're meeting with a group up in the northeast to pray through some of these things.

About how to do this. So what sort of grip does greed have in our lives? I make the assumption that we all struggle with it. I do.

And so what do we do with that? Because greed is typically hidden over into having the latest and, you know, keeping up with everybody else and indirectly impressing people with the latest this and that. These are touchy points that we have to really walk in the Holy Spirit with. Because I'm not suggesting any kind of legalism at all.

This is an interior conversion that I'm talking about where we love mercy. First of all, we love mercy. And we learn how to walk humbly with our God.

That's a process of conversion for me. It's to learn how to walk humbly with my God. I want to be in control always.

We're always called to humble ourselves before the Lord. There's a reason why we're called to humble ourselves. It's a command.

Because if we don't humble ourselves, we won't. It's not going to happen. And so to love mercy, to do justly, to walk humbly with our God.

Let that ring in your ears today as a question. Lord, take me deeper. This is what Lent's about.

Is to become under the Father's gaze and to become more in tune with the Father's heart. Who causes the rain to fall on the just and the unjust. Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Chapter 5 ends. And that's all in the context of loving our enemies. What fears do we face when we're asked to be generous? Perhaps there's questions you have about just this sermon.

Ask those questions. Take them into prayer. I want to be like Cornelius who catches the Lord's gaze.

When did we do these things, Lord? You know. Matthew 25. When you did it to the least of these, my brethren, you did it to me.

Oh, I didn't know that. That's the key. It's so free and so unforced at that point.

But sometimes we have to start somewhere and we have to put it on our calendar and we have to get going. And begin to obey and out of obedience. Obedience is kind of like learning the liturgy, right? It's really stiff at first.

You're going through the motions and you're reading the words. And all of a sudden you find yourself one day where you don't even need to read the words anymore because it's in your heart. It's just flowing out like spontaneous prayer.

That's where it needs to go, right? And so I think loving mercy happens that way. It happens by small obedient steps and really seeking the word on this. Because I've found in my life if I don't stay on this, I will gravitate away from it.

It's easy to stay in my study and just be enamored with my books and the latest podcast and all that stuff. And so I just ask that question for all of us. What do you want to do with all of us as a people? People of mercy, who love mercy.

We didn't plant this church in the suburbs for a reason. And I know half of you live in the suburbs, that's fine. But you're worshipping with a community in the urban core.

What does that mean for you? You have to ask that question. I can't answer that. You're being drawn here for a reason.

And it's so beyond probably what you're thinking. The Lord has plans that are good. Amen.

So these are just open-ended questions that I'm asking myself these days. Why don't we just dial in to Micah 6.8 again as we close in prayer. Lord, we thank you that in Jesus Christ, He is the just one.

He is the merciful one. He is the one who humbled himself and became a human being. And so in the spirit of Jesus Christ, who fulfills the prophets, we ask, Lord, that we would walk and follow Jesus in this way, in this manner.

And we need help. And so, Holy Spirit, come and lead us in these ways of generosity and mercy and prayer and fasting. And let this season of Lent just begin to explore the basics of all of that.

As your eyes go to and fro throughout the whole earth, looking for those whose hearts are completely yours. Let us be found of you. Let us be found of you.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Audio: <https://sermonindex1.b-cdn.net/28/SID28625.mp3>
Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/michael-flowers/2nd-sunday-of-lent-when-you-give-alms/>

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net