

Alms

Matt. 6: 2-4.

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The Lord takes for granted that His disciples would walk righteously before God in alms, prayer, and fasting. He is not satisfied with bidding such give to him that asks, as in the preceding chapter (Matt. 5: 42), and from him that would borrow not to turn away. It is by the grace of Christ in contrast with legal narrowness. Here we have the single motive of pleasing our Father that is in the heavens. Thus would their light shine in Christ as believed and confessed by them, not their righteousness be done before men to be seen of them, which is the object expressly forbidden. As in alms we have the needy and distressed of mankind directly brought before us, we have this followed up by prayer to our Father in the closet, fasting subjoined to set aside self-indulgence for the body and leave room for humiliation before Him: thus dealing with man, apostles, self and God, in ways suited to the Father revealed by the Son.

"When therefore thou doest alms, sound not a trumpet before thee, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be glorified by men. Verily I say to you, They *have* their reward. But thou, when thou doest alms, let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth; so that thine alms may be secret, and thy Father that seeth in secret will repay thee."

It is not the habit of giving or lending in liberality of heart, unstintedly and unselfishly, but that merciful consideration of the wretched and suffering, which becomes those who serve God in a fallen world (James 1: 27). Each duty has its place. Both, adorn the teaching that is of our Saviour God, as we are called to do in all things. Prudence may question, common sense hesitate; but faith acts on His word, and without faith it is impossible to please Him. It is no question of doing another's will, but of Christ's will.

In all cases the snare is ostentatious, doing our righteousness before men to be seen of them. Otherwise, says our Lord, ye have no reward of your Father that is in the heavens. He lays the utmost stress on the manner and the motive with which the act is done. Display in the doing of alms He compares to sounding a trumpet before the doer, and denounces it as what the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, within and without where people meet and pass. Can anything be conceived baser than a son of God playing a part to win the notice and approbation of men? How solemnly He adds, Verily I say to you, They have got their reward!

How elevating it is for the soul, in having to do with the relief of distress among men, to act in secret, and in the sight of the Father that seeth in secret as the One to repay! It is not enough to exclude other men. To bring Him in and in secret is essential to the purity of the case. It is He who is above all, and through all, and in us all; and the least of His gifts to us is what enables us to help the suffering and the needy. To leave Him out is the essence of unbelief. To bring Him in is what we as His children owe Him in love and honour, the witness of our dependence, of our gratitude, and of our loyal service.

We have only to look at the ways of men in Christendom, in order to learn where neglect of the Saviour's teaching leads His disciples, and the influence of self, not only on the world but on the godly swayed by the spirit of the age. What notoriety! What emulation! What boasting or pride, and even ambition! What a contrast with Him who being rich for our sake became poor, that we by His poverty might be enriched! And how striking that not in rich Corinth but in the poor churches of Macedonia,

scripture tells us of the grace of God bestowed in this way; how in a great trial of affliction the abundance of their joy and their deep poverty abounded to the riches of their free-hearted liberality! It was not even according as the apostle hoped, but beyond; and the secret of it was, that they gave themselves first to the Lord, and to us by God's will. Thus is genuineness of love proved.

But there is another invaluable word of the Lord as to this which calls for our heed. "But thou when thou dost alms, let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth; so that thine alms may be in secret, and thy Father that seeth in secret will repay thee." It is not only from others but from ourselves that such doings should be hidden. Self is a subtler evil than men. The action of grace is defiled and becomes a poison to me and a dishonour to God when I think of it with complacency. If rightly done, it was passed to our Father for His remembrance, not ours.

Here lay Job's failure, which no inflictions of Satan, nor unsympathy, nor yet suspicion, of friends even touched. He was a most gracious man, but he thought of it, and not of God only who wrought in Him. To this he must be and was brought: to boast only in God, judge himself, and submit with all his heart. Part of the lesson was that his left hand should not know what his right hand did. This on the contrary, up to the end of his appeal (Job 31), he knew only too well. But all was changed when, instead of looking at fruits of grace in himself, he saw God in very faithfulness withering up all self-satisfaction. "I had heard of Thee by the hearing of the ear, but now mine eye seeth Thee: wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes" (Job 42: 6).

Thus we hear that even in alms the Father in secret must be the motive in order to make it acceptable to Him. The Lord insists on inward truth. O my fellow-sinner, how can this be while you are dead in trespasses and sins? "Ye must be born anew;" and life, this new life, is in Christ only. But He is the object of faith set for this purpose by God. "He that believeth hath life eternal;" and as Christ is the source, so is He the strength of that life. "I live; no longer I, but Christ liveth in me."