

## CONCERNING CHRISTIAN GIVING

It has been estimated that more than half of Jesus Christ's teachings concern the proper use of and generosity with money. This is extraordinarily significant, since Jesus did not waste His words in idle chatter, and the Evangelists chose only the most important of His discourses to record for future generations of believers. Clearly, both Jesus and his Evangelists considered the proper attitude toward and use of money to be important to life in the Kingdom of God. Jesus built on the foundation provided by God's revelation to Israel under the Old Covenant.

In the Old Testament, when God commanded the Tabernacle to be outfitted for the service of Worship, Moses asked the people of Israel for donations. They brought so much in excess that they had to be restrained from giving any more. (Ex. 35 & 36) When David built the first Temple, he did the same, and again the people provide more than enough for the project. (1 Chr. 29) Zerubbabel, when he restored the Temple following the Babylonian exile again approached the people for donations and they responded with abundance. (Ezr. 7) This was for the initial building or refurbishing of the successive Temples.

For the regular maintenance and upkeep of the Temple, and for the maintenance of those who served in it, the Lord appointed the use of the first-fruits of the children of Israel, as well as the other offerings brought to the Temple, for thanksgiving, for sin, for reconciliation, for vows, and also a portion of all offerings and tithes. (Num. 17, Deut. 18, Ezek. 44, 2 Chr. 31, Neh. 10) Each family put aside the first fruits of their orchards and gardens, the first-born of their flocks and herds, as well as one-tenth of the total harvest and increase of their flocks and herds each year. All of this was brought to the Temple and given to God for the upkeep of the Temple and its servants.

It happened that sometimes the people were negligent in their duties for the upkeep of the Temple. In Malachi we read of God's anger with the people when they fell away from their duties:

Even from the days of your fathers ye are gone away from mine ordinances, and have not kept them. Return unto me, and I will return unto you, saith the Lord of hosts. But ye said, Wherein shall we return? Will a man rob God? Yet ye have robbed me. But ye say, Wherein have we robbed thee? In tithes and offerings. Ye are cursed with a curse: for ye have robbed me, even this whole nation. Bring ye all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be meat in mine house, and prove me now herewith, saith the Lord of hosts, if I will not open you the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing, that there shall not be room enough to receive it. And I will rebuke the devourer for your sakes, and he shall not destroy the fruits of your ground; neither shall your vine cast her fruit before the time in the field, saith the Lord of hosts. (Malachi 3)

We also see God's promise to increase those who remember their duty toward Him. We need never fear that our gifts to God's house will impoverish us. Rather, the more carefully we keep our responsibilities, the more God will give us, and will protect what we have. In Proverbs it is written: Honor the Lord with thy substance, and with the firstfruits of all thine increase: So shall thy barns be filled with plenty, and thy presses shall burst out with new wine.(Prov. 3:9,10)

In addition to the responsibility to keep up God's House and provide for His Ministers, the children of Israel were encouraged to offer alms to the poor and needy - above and beyond what they gave to the Temple. He that despiseth his neighbour sinneth: but he that hath mercy on the poor, happy is he. (Prov. 14:21) He that giveth unto the poor shall not lack: but he that hideth his eyes shall have many a curse. (Prov. 28:27) Again, God promises to bless those who are generous: He hath dispersed, he hath given to the poor; his righteousness endureth for ever; his horn shall be exalted with honour. (Ps. 112:9) The liberal soul shall be made fat; and he that watereth shall be watered also himself. (Prov 11:25) He that hath a bountiful eye shall be blessed; for he giveth of his bread to the poor. (Prov. 22:9) He that hath pity upon the poor lendeth unto the Lord; and that which he hath given will he pay him again. (Prov. 19:17) And most dramatically: Treasures gained by wickedness do not profit, but righteousness delivereth from death. (Pr. 10:2) and: Riches do not profit in the day of wrath, but righteousness delivereth from death. (Pr. 11:4) "Righteousness" in the Old Testament usually means "Generosity" or "Liberality" in almsgiving. In fact, these verses quoted in the Triodion read "Almsgiving delivereth from death".

This was the spiritual heritage of those to whom Christ preached during His ministry. They already knew that they were to provide offerings and tithes to maintain the Temple, and that they were to give alms generously to the poor. His teachings were on top of and beyond that.

Jesus said unto them: 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. Mat. 19:21

Then Jesus beholding him loved him, and said unto him, One thing thou lackest: go thy way, sell whatsoever thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come, take up the cross, and follow me. Mark 10:21

And He answered and saith unto them, He that hath two coats, let him impart to him that hath none; and he that hath meat, let him do likewise. Luke 3:11

Give and it shall be given unto you; good measure, pressed down, and shaken together, and running over, shall men give into your bosom. For with the same measure that ye mete withal it shall be measured to you again. Luke 6:38

But rather give alms of such things as ye have; and, behold, all things are clean unto you. Luke 11:41

Sell that ye have, and give alms; provide yourselves bags which wax not old, a treasure in the heavens that faileth not, where no thief approacheth, neither moth corrupteth. Luke 12:33

Now when Jesus heard these things, he said unto him, Yet lackest thou one thing: sell all that thou hast, and distribute unto the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come, follow me. Luke 18:22

His parables such as the Good Samaritan, His observations, such as on the Widow's mites, and His commandments to give without ostentation all forcefully repeat the same theme: that we should give generously. Give to him that asketh of thee, and from him that would borrow of thee turn not thou away. Mat. 5:40 Give to everyone who begs from you; and of him who

takes away your goods do not ask them again. Luke 6:30. And finally, He promises that He Himself will receive and reward all our generosity and kindness in the beautiful Gospel which is read before Great Lent: For I was a hungered, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me 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 unto me. ... Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me. Mat. 25:35,36,40. From that moment until now, the Saints and Fathers of the Church have shone us through their experiences and visions that every time we give *for Jesus Christ's sake* He, Himself receives our generosity and blesses us. Such instances are far, far too many to enumerate here, but the following are good examples:

Martin, a Roman soldier and catechumen in the Church, was travelling one winter with his companions to the town of Amiens, in France. He saw a beggar, almost naked and freezing with cold, in front of the gates. Martin was distressed and, parting from his companions, took off his soldier's cloak and, with his sword, cut it in half. He gave half to the beggar and wrapped himself in the other, and went on his way. That night, the Lord Jesus appeared to him in a dream, clad in the other half of his cloak, and said to His agnels: "Martin is only a catechumen, and see, he clothes Me in his garment!" This Martin left the army, was Baptised, and eventually became St. Martin Bishop of Tours. Another time, Peter the Merciful chanced upon a shipwrecked man, who had barely saved his naked body from the wreck, who begged him for clothing. Peter took off his costly toga and clothed the naked man in it. Shortly afterwards, Peter saw his toga in the shop of some merchant, displayed for sale. Peter was very distressed that the shipwrecked man had sold his toga instead of making use of it. "I am not worthy", he said, "That the Lord should accept my alms." But the Lord appeared to him in a dream in the guise of a handsome man, brighter than the sun, with a Cross on His head and wearing Peter's toga. "What are you sad about, Peter?" the Lord asked him. "How can I not be sad, Lord, when I see that what I gave to that poor wretch he went and sold in the bazaar?" Then the Lord asked him: "Do you know this garment I am wearing?" Peter replied: "I know it, Lord; it is the toga I gave to the naked man." The Lord said to him: "Do not be sad, then. You gave it to the poor man, and I received it and praise your action."

It has always been the custom of the Christian community to combine almsgiving with prayer. St. John Chrysostom insists that we should never pray without giving alms since almsgiving renders God disposed to hear our prayers. He said: "Let each lay by him in store on the first day of the week as God has prospered him, and lay it down as tribute for the seven days. In this way give alms whether more or less. For thou shalt not appear before the Lord empty. (Ex. 23:15) This was said to the Jews, how much more then to us. For this cause the poor stand before the doors, that no one may enter empty, but each may do alms at his entrance. Thou enterest to implore mercy. First show mercy. ... Make God thy debtor, and then offer thy prayers. Lend to Him, and then ask a return, and thou shalt receive it with interest. God wills this and does not retract. If thou ask with alms, He holds Himself obliged. If thou ask with alms, thou lendest and receivest interest. Yes, I beseech you! It is not for stretching out thy hands that thou shalt be heard! Stretch forth thy hands, not to heaven, but to the poor. If thou stretch forth thy hand to the hand of the poor, thou hast reached the very summit of heaven. For He who sits there receives thine alms. But if thou liftest them up without a gift, thou

gainest nothing. " He also said: "Let us go out into the hands of the poor, for this spot is the Mount of Olives. For the multitude of the poor are olive trees planted in the house of God, dropping the oil which is profitable for us there, which the five vergins had, and the others that had not received perished thereby. Having received this, let us enter in that with bright lamps we may meet the bridegroom, having received this let us go hence." On another occasion he said: "The gain is not equal to [those who give and who receive]. For ye, it ye give, will give those things from which, willing or unwilling, ye must soon after part, and give place to others; but what thou receivest is great and far more abundant. Or are ye not so disposed, that in giving ye will receive? For if ye are not so disposed, I do not even wish you to give. ... Except one have first so disposed himself, as receiving rather than giving, as gaining ten thousand fold, as benefitted rather than a benefactor, let him not give. For this is not so much my care, that the saints may be supported, for even if you give not, another will give. So that what I want is this, that you may have a relief from your sins. But he that gives not so will have no relief. For it is not giving that is doing alms, but the doing it with readiness; the rejoicing, the feeling grateful to him that receives."

We give alms along with our prayers for ourselves, that we may be forgiven and cared for by God. We give alms along with our prayers for our families, friends, the sick and others, so that God will hear our prayers and help those for whom we pray. We give alms along with our prayers for the departed that God will hear our prayers and grant them His mercy. We give alms that we may draw near to God and share our love with Him. We give to the Church in order to show our love for God by honoring His house and providing for the worthy Worship of Him. We give to the Church knowing that God will reward us with increased prosperity and security as He has promised in the Bible. We give to the poor knowing that God will love us and reward us with His gracious presence as He promised in the Bible. We give no matter how little we have, knowing that God will bless us and care for us. We give, and give, and give, knowing that in our giving God is glorified and we are saved.