

Almsgiving, to quench our flaming passions.

It is always prayer, and it is always a kind word, and it is sometimes the giving of money.

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**Water will quench a flaming fire; and alms maketh an atonement for sins.** (Sirach 3:30 Brenton)

Christianity is an actively moral religion. If one is a Christian, he will struggle to follow the commandments and will grow ever closer to becoming like God, so that the image in which he was created becomes the likeness of God.

The things we do in this life matter. Our priorities matter. Whether we are kind to the poor or indifferent to them matters. ***There is no Christianity without almsgiving.***

The relatively new heresy of our age is that Christianity can exist without moral action. It is perceived as an irrevocable legal contract between man and God. Scripture has never taught that and in fact has taught the necessity of struggling to live a moral life. ***Without a struggle to live a moral life, there is no salvation.*** No one questioned this idea until the so-called “Reformation”, which reformed nothing, but only broke something even more that was broken.

In the Orthodox Christian church, almsgiving is always played a central role. Many faithful Christians, when they have some great need, pray to God and give alms, with fasting. The heart considers itself to be obligated to give alms, because the heart is becoming like Christ.

We do not give alms because we think that we are in any way obligating God to do something for us. We give alms because this is the godly thing to do.

Many of us have friends or family who are in terrible condition. Many of us have problems that seem insurmountable. There are no secular solutions to spiritual problems. We must pray, and we must fast, and we must give alms. These three are a “Trinity” of supplication to God. In the midst of all the supplication, of course, we must also act with our bodies.

We must not think of alms as only giving money to a poor person. Alms is also giving of ourselves, our resources, our kindness, to whomever needs it. These passages, below from Sirach, show how we should think of alms. The beginning of almsgiving is love. Those who love him notice the needs of others, and will always be giving them a “friendly answer with meekness”.

“My son, defraud not the poor of his living, and make not the needy eyes to wait long. (2) Make not an hungry soul sorrowful; neither provoke a man in his distress. (3) Add not more trouble to an heart that is vexed; and defer not to give to him that is in need. (4) Reject not the supplication of the afflicted; neither turn away thy face from a poor man. (5) Turn not away thine eye from the needy, and give him none occasion to curse thee: (6) For if he curse thee in the bitterness of his soul, his prayer shall be heard of him that made him. (7) Get thyself the love of the congregation, and bow thy head to a great man. (8) Let it not grieve thee to bow down thine ear to the poor, and give him a friendly answer with meekness.” (Sirach 4:1-8 Brenton)

It is a sad testimony of the weakness of our faith, that Orthodox Christians seem to suffer from depression, marital problems, drug abuse, and secular opinions, as much or almost as much as society at large. This is because, in our churches, moral life is not emphasized. People tend to think of their religion as going to church, or lighting a candle. Our religion is to become like God, and be perfected, so that we would know Him intimately. It is impossible to become like God unless we try to be like Him.

Evaluate your life, and see if you are giving alms. If only a small portion of your income goes to alms giving, then you are sinning against your soul. It is quite easy for a person in a parish to give alms, because they should be giving a pledge to their church. A good starting point for this pledge would be 10% of your income. Besides this, there are always opportunities to give to those in need, including those we know and encounter, and those we do not. In our church, we make a collection every Sunday for some need. We have given money directly to people we know, and also to Orthodox charities such as “Orthodox Africa”, or the “Fund for Assistance”.

You should further evaluate your almsgiving to see how you encounter your fellowman in your daily life. Are you friendly, or are you judgmental? Do you notice the suffering of people around you, or are you indifferent or even oblivious?

Do not neglect to offer alms by praying for those that are around you. ***If we do not pray for someone, then we cannot claim to love them.*** It is as simple as that. It does not matter if we have a poor prayer life – we have no excuse. If we do not pray for someone that we do not love them. Apply this to your mother, your husband, your children, those in your church, and those you encounter in daily life. If you do not pray for them, you do not love them. This is the first way that you must give alms.

You will find that if you pray for people, God will bring to your mind other things that you should be doing. There is not enough kindness in the world. Almsgiving must be born out of kindness.

I will give you an example of alms giving that happened in prison. I counseled a man, and eventually baptized him in prison. He was disgusted by the flaming homosexuals that were around him. Unfortunately, there are men that prostitute themselves and act in flagrant ways, giving their body to whoever wants it, for a pittance. There was one of these men who would come by (I will call him Jake) “Jakes” cell and would try to talk to him. Since the only way this poor man knew how to relate to other men was acting in a sexual way, Jake was put off by him and would be rude to him and tell him to go away.

I rebuked Jake for this attitude, and said it is most likely that this man is very lonely and even though he is acting out and doing sexually gross things, he is a human being made in the image of God, and he needs kindness. I rarely tell people in an absolute way what to do, but I told Jake that he must pray for this man as if he is to consider himself a Christian. Jake started praying for this man, and eventually he started talking to the man when he came to him, and lo and behold, the man stopped talking in a sexual way to him. He would talk to him normally, as two men should talk to one another. Occasionally they would have a “shot” of coffee together, and although it would be too much to say that they became good friends, Jake was able to show kindness this man. He learned that he could actually have a human interaction with someone without making it a sexual act. This was almsgiving.