



GIVING UP, AND GIVING TO, ARE LENTEN HALLMARKS

“What are you giving up for Lent?” I have heard this question ever since I was a child. Back then, giving up candy was an easy choice, since we seldom had it at home anyway. And it was certainly easier than giving up bickering with my siblings, with whom I lived in close quarters day and night.

Even people who do not observe Lent sometimes ask, “What are you giving up?”, because that particular practice seems to be the best-known aspect of Lent. And indeed, fasting from something enjoyable, like candy or self-centered bickering, for 40 days is powerful, as we deny ourselves for the sake of drawing closer to God. But giving something up is not the only way to do that.

Prayer, a central Christian practice at all times, is traditionally intensified during Lent. It dovetails with fasting, as each occasion to rein in our personal desires prompts us to pray. As we pray for the strength to resist temptation and maintain our fast, we reflect on Jesus suffering for us, and further comprehend God’s great love (John 3:16).

But there is another Lenten practice which receives less attention: almsgiving. That term may sound antiquated, perhaps passé. But making voluntary contributions to the poor has been inherent in Christianity from very outset, rooted in its Jewish heritage.

Jesus, a faithful Jew, just assumed that his followers would give alms, lacing this instruction with “when”, not “if”: “*When* you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do...But *when* you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you” (Matthew 6:2-4, emphasis added).

Accordingly, almsgiving was integral to the early Church (Acts 2:44-45). For example, the Christians in Antioch gave generously to their brothers and sisters in Christ who were suffering from famine in Judea (Acts 11:27-30). The Church was instructed to care for poor widows who had no family to support them (1 Timothy 5:16).

Distributing food to needy widows was the initial reason for ordaining deacons (Acts 6:1-6). Perhaps that is why God brought almsgiving to the forefront this deacon’s attention this year, with a personal nudge.

But no one ever asks, “Whom are you *giving to* for Lent?” Is that because we want to be secretive, to honor Jesus’ instruction of not letting our left hand know what our right hand is doing? Or might it be that we are not genuinely focused on giving, especially as we wonder about our economy and hold our purse strings tightly? Perhaps we need to reflect anew on almsgiving, and how it aligns with God’s heart.

God’s concern for the poor is revealed in almost every book of the Bible. For instance, He instructed his people through the Mosaic law to leave the crops at the edges of the fields and the gleanings for the poor (Leviticus 19:9-10). God promised blessings for the one who “shares his bread with the poor” (Proverbs 22:9). Beyond that, we can see that God is pleased when we give sacrificially, instead of just giving what we won’t miss (e.g., Mark 12:41-44).

Above all, we see “the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that thought he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor (2 Corinthians 8:9). That stunning truth alone should move us to eager generosity, knowing that whenever we give “to one of the least of these”, we give to Him (Matthew 25:40).

If we learn to see needy people through the eyes of Jesus — each one made in God’s image and worth dying for — we will no longer view sacrificial almsgiving as a spiritual discipline or moral duty. We will see it as the joyful privilege of giving freely to Jesus, “paying it forward” by sharing his love, care, and material provision with others who need it.

With love in the Lord,
The Rev. Christine Maddux