



Great Lent Giveaway 2013

Wish of a Child

Youth Group Session 2 – Who is My Neighbor? - Christian Almsgiving Part I – Background

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Introduction - Background

Great Lent as a call to prayer, fasting and almsgiving. Often we focus on the first two elements, but it is clear from the teaching of the Church and her practice that almsgiving is also a key element of our process of growing in Christ - our focus for Great Lent.

The word alms comes from the Greek word 'eleos' for 'oil', evoking the image of pouring a soothing, healing oil upon an inflamed wound. Every time we pray 'Lord, have mercy', we are using a form of the word, *eleos*, asking for God's mercy.

While it is appropriate to ask for God's mercy on ourselves, Christians are also to be concerned for others, particularly the poor, the downtrodden, the sick, the imprisoned, etc. Traditionally the Church had special ministries for the poor, the widows and for orphans. Our own Ukrainian Orthodox Church has established the Ukrainian orphanage ministry in this spirit.

Hence, our almsgiving is to 'flow' like oil, from our hearts, to others. The story of the Good Samaritan is so helpful to us because the Church traditionally saw Jesus as the one who showed compassion, and stopped by the roadside of broken human life, to lift us out of our misery - including our fallen spiritual state in sin.



The Sacrament of Holy Anointing, which will be celebrated in our Churches on Great and Holy Wednesday is a reminder of this ministry of Christ to us. But this charitable love and service to all is a ministry of the Church as well - so that the Church acts to bring healing to people in many ways - through the sacrament of Anointing/Healing, prayers of intercession, collection of material goods for distribution, counsel and emotional care and support, and in other ways.



If we believe that the Church is to be at the center of Christ's ministry of healing today, then this ministry needs workers! There is no hospital that works to bring healing to others if there are no doctors, nurses, nursing assistants, facility caretakers, laundry workers or admissions people. Every position is important in the hospital. So it is with the Church, that everyone has a role to play in the ministry of the Church to the poor.

Almsgiving, the pouring forth of mercy, happens through the generosity in the heart of each believer and a deep desire to see our neighbors healed. Our mercy is often represented by our financial offerings for the poor, which have not only practical value, but carry with them the spiritual character of mercy (*eleos*), which brings healing, and love

How do we Identify the Poor and engage with them?

The first thing we must do is identify who the poor person is and then to engage with them. This is not as easy as it might seem because it poses two questions. First, it's easy to 'see' many poor people, suffering around the world, who lack the basic necessities of food, water, shelter, health care, etc. But the sense of the gospel parable of the Good Samaritan is that the opportunity for 'almsgiving' - sharing mercy and love - are often much closer to us than we first realize, and can be ignored by us, especially over time

The fact that the priest and Levite pass by shows that there are other agendas in life that present themselves to people as more important than stopping to show love or care. But the parable halts this thinking in its tracks, making an example of the priest and Levite, who while they were religious, came up short of what Christ wanted to reveal about the New Covenant that goes beyond a religious legal responsibility of the Jewish law to broad and deep charity toward others, and engagement with others. This is how the *eleos* of God's mercy is to spread throughout the world, with the Gospel.

Almsgiving works not only to bring tangible help to those in need but also serves as a healing remedy for *our* souls, making us more aware and attuned to the needs of others. Often, the more (and more often) we give alms the more we desire to do more and love grows in our hearts. We begin to see the needs of others and respond, not just with a donation, but with part of our hearts. In this way, almsgiving opens the doors of our hearts to heal us from the self-centeredness which is sinful, to receiving the love of Christ within.

Our first call to Almsgiving is to those close to us. We cannot save the world and may be either egotistically proud or foolish to think that our mission is to do so. The focus of this parable is 'Who is my neighbor?' - the person who is close to us, who is nonetheless in need. That person may not be close physically, but close emotionally or spiritually, like a friend that we met in camp who we stay in contact with.

