

The Spirit of Giving in the Early Church

Transcript

When Tony asked me, several months ago, if I was doing anything this weekend, of course I said *no*, not realizing that he was going to invite me to do something big. So here I am, giving a keynote address, and I want to lower your expectations. This is not going to be the formal address. I'm not going to be reading. (Thank you.) I won't be reading from a text. I'll be reading from various texts, but I don't have a formal presentation to make to you. I'm still thinking through the subject matter that I've been presented with, because it really wasn't until I saw the flyers that I realized what I was talking about, and I was grateful that such a specific topic had been chosen. I read it as the spirit of charity in the early Christian community, so that's the slant that I'm going to be taking on it. Under that title, there was a particular passage from [the] Acts of the Apostles that I will read to you. This follows the Pentecost event. It's in the second chapter, from the 42nd verse through the 47th, and the "they" that is being talked about here are about 3,000 souls who were added to the company. In the previous passage we're told that 3,000 were converted as a result of Peter's Pentecost message. Then we're told:

And they continued steadfastly in the Apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers. Then fear came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were done through the Apostles. Now all who believed were together and had all things in common and sold their possessions and goods and divided them among all, as anyone had need. So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the Church daily those who were being saved.

I'm going to already take a little bit of a diversion here, and that is, I'm going to take you to Troas for a second. I was, for ten years, the bishop of Troas. Let me explain to you why that is. I was an auxiliary bishop. That is, I was not a bishop... We don't ordain bishops-at-large in the Orthodox Church. You're not just a bishop and now: just float. You have to be anchored somewhere. You have to be the bishop of a city. But if I were the bishop of an American city, I would have to take a city from somebody, and I wasn't being ordained to be a bishop of a city; I was being ordained to be an assistant to the archbishop. So an assistant bishop is given the title of a city that we used to have, and that we hope to one day have again. It's a kind of laying claim to.

And I was given... And I can't tell you how thrilled I was to be given the title "Bishop of Troas," because Troas is a biblical city. It's mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles, several times in the Acts of the Apostles. Its real name was Alexandria Troas. It was a city that was founded by a governor, a general of Alexander the Great, as a kind of homage to him. There were several Alexandrias, and the most famous is the Alexandria in Egypt. But Alexandria Troas was called that because it was Alexandria, in the region of Troy. It was about ten miles from the ancient site of Troy. Over time, "Alexandria" was dropped, and it was just called "Troas."

It was, in fact, in the short list of cities that Constantine had in mind for his new capital. When he was thinking of moving from Rome eastward, he went to Troas, and it was a very serious contender, but his engineers demonstrated to him that the harbor was soaking over with material that was coming down the Bosphorus. Troas is right at the mouth of the Hellespont. It's at the base of the Hellespont, which leads you into the Sea of Marmara, which leads you up to the Bosphorus, which leads you to the Black Sea. So this is a very important passageway. They said this heavy stream that's coming down the Hellespont deposits material here, and there won't be a harbor here for much longer. They turned out to be right. In about 400-500 years, the harbor silted over. Then it became a kind of a dead city. It's just a ruin now. There's nothing there.

But when it was there, St. Paul went there, we're told in Acts of the Apostles, and it was there that he was probably strategizing his next move: return along the path that he'd already come up the coast of Asia Minor, go into the interior towards Cappadocia, where was the Spirit leading him? We're told that he had a vision of man of Macedonia, saying, "Come and help us." So it was at Troas that he decided to turn west and go to Europe.

When he does leave Troas, the Acts of the Apostles shifts into the first person plural. It says, "And we sailed from Troas," and the next few chapters are told in the first person plural, as if a companion had kept a travel journal. We understand that companion to have been Luke, whom he met at Troas, and they journeyed together and returned to Troas.

And here's why I make this long digression: when they come back to Troas, we're told, "And we sailed away from Philippi" ([Acts 20:6](#)):

[And we sailed away from Philippi after the days of the unleavened bread, and in five days we joined the others at Troas, where we stayed seven days.](#)

This is [Acts 20:7](#):

[Now on the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul, ready to depart the next day, spoke to them, and continued his message until midnight.](#)

"On the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread."—that's code for: "On Sunday, when the Church assembled for the Eucharist." That's the only mention of a Sunday Eucharist in Scripture: was in Troas. So I'm very chuffed about that, as the Brits would say.

Furthermore, you Antiochians share a bold [saint] in high esteem, as well you should; I know I certainly do—St. Ignatius of Antioch, a great bishop, who was arrested in his old age, in the early second century, in the first decade of the second century, and dragged in chains through Asia Minor to Rome, where he was thrown to the beasts at the Colosseum, for the entertainment of the sophisticates. He waited for his ship for Rome at Troas, and at Troas he wrote thank-you letters to the churches that had shown him hospitality along the way. So we have letters of St. Ignatius to the Church at Smyrna, to the Church of Philippi, to the Magnesians.

All these letters are coming from Troas, and most beautifully, he wrote to the bishop of Smyrna, who was a very young man at the time, a man named Polycarp, and he advised him on how to be a bishop. That man, Polycarp, became a great martyr some 40-50 years later, and his martyrdom, in fact, is the first complete martyrdom we have, of his life, his arrest, his trial, the

events that occurred in the Colosseum. After his burning, his disciples collected his ashes which were to them more precious than gold, and they placed them in a special place, and they would come together annually on the memorial of his death, of his martyrdom, to celebrate at the spot.

This whole practice of relics in altars and memorializing on the day of the death, that all is testified to, attested to, [for the] first time in the literary record in Polycarp. The life and death of Polycarp—and Polycarp was the disciple of Ignatius, and Ignatius wrote from Troas... I like to make those things come together, for me, anyway.

And it was at Troas that Ignatius wrote to the Christians in Rome, and said, “Please don’t stop this. I want this to happen. I’m going to become a disciple now. I want to be thrown to the beasts. I want to be the wheat that’s ground in their teeth. I want to become it. I want to become a disciple.” It’s a very, very moving letter, and it set the tone. It created a mindset among subsequent martyrs. They looked to Ignatius’ testimony for spiritual sustenance. They modeled themselves after Ignatius, which [letter] he wrote at Troas.

I got to love the name so much, and now I’m Metropolitan of Pittsburgh, which is really nice... I mean, I’m very grateful that the Church bestowed on me this wonderful metropolis, but it doesn’t chant all that well: “*Sava tou* [hums his *pheme*]... Pittsburgh.” It just kind of plops. I asked that they Hellenize it and called it Pitt-ou-polis, but so far...

So to get back to the subject, and the subject is, in my understanding, charity in the primitive Christian community. Because I understood it in that way, I want to unpack the terms that I just used. “Charity”—that is a Latin word, I hope you appreciate. It comes from the word *caritas*, which is the Latin translation of *agapē*, and it’s the word that was used by the translators of the King James Version, to translate the word *agapē*, that great hymn toward love, in [1 Corinthians 13](#): “Love is patient, love is kind, love is long-suffering, love...” In the King James Version, it’s “charity.”

Charity is not the word Greeks would have used. It’s not the word... You won’t find that word to describe what we’d think of nowadays as charity. They would call that *eleēmosynē*, and that’s a word that appears often in Acts. They were showing acts of *eleēmosynē*; they were doing eleemosynary things. That is a Greek word that has the same root as *eleos*, “mercy”: acts of mercy, acts of pity, of compassion.

Let’s just set that aside, terminologically. What does that mean, and what was the understanding of [eleemosynary]? That Greek word, by the way, *eleēmosynē*, is, more often than not, translated as “almsgiving.” So instead of “charity,” you’ll find “alms” in the texts themselves.

What am I going to use as evidence? What tells us what the early Church [did]? Where do we go to find out how the early Church lived and what their Christians thought? Obviously, the privileged testimony is the New Testament writings, but they are not the only thing that we have to go on. There are also near-contemporary writings, which shed interesting light on early Church practices.

I think of a document like the *Didachē*, the teaching of the Twelve Apostles, a short document that probably dates from the 90s, and which we knew about—people wrote about it in ancient histories—but we never saw it until a monk discovered a single copy of it in the Monastery of

St. Savas in Palestine in the 1850s. As recently as that. But it provides us with a very interesting primitive look, a look at primitive baptismal practices, Eucharistic practices, eleemosynary practices, Church structure.

We have other books that didn't make the final cut for Scripture because, when the Church Fathers came to consider the question of the canon, they worked on the principle that privileged books should be those written by the Apostles themselves and not the second generation. Even though early collections of the New Testament writings often included the letters of St. Ignatius at the end or the *Shepherd of Hermas*, which is another important document and an important witness to the attitudes towards charity that I want to call into play here, eventually the Church said *no*, not because there was anything wrong with those things, but because they're not clearly the work of the first generation.

I have to make this kind of apology for them, because we've got this terminological confusion about them. I'll tell you that these are apocryphal books or deuterocanonical, and somehow that carries with it a stigma, that these are kind of Gnostic or books that were rejected and put on the list of forbidden readings or something. That's not the case. These are just supplementary Christian readings.

Before I go any further, I want to tell you that nothing I'm going to tell you is original. Everything I borrowed from somebody. I hope I'm not misrepresenting that somebody or those somebodies, but I want to give you a kind of reading list, so that if you are interested by any of this, you can go on and get into it a little deeper yourselves. A very useful volume, and it's published by our own Holy Cross Press, is *Wealth and Poverty in Early Church and Society*. It's part of the Holy Cross Studies in Patristic Theology and History [series], and I was heavily dependent on this very, very rich collection and very recent. It just came out in 2008.

Wayne Meeks is a very important historian in the early Church and biblical studies at Yale, and he's written... His classic work is *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul*, and he followed it up with *The Origins of Christian Morality: The First Two Centuries*, also key books.

The great historian of late antiquity, Peter Brown, just this year put out a massive book called, *Through the Eye of a Needle: Wealth, the Fall of Rome, and the Making of Christianity in the West, 350-550 AD*. This is beyond the scope of what I'm going to be talking about, but it's really a very, very interesting book about how bishops made arrangements with people, to manage their finances, as it were, for the sake of the Church, at a later period in Church history, when there were rich people to draw on. But I'm going to be talking about a period where the rich are very few and very far between. This issue of wealth and poverty in the Church is very, very powerfully dealt with in this Peter Brown book.

I'm very grateful for a book that just came out this month, called *Charity: The Place of the Poor in the Biblical Tradition*, Yale University Press. It's by Gary Anderson. This is a slim book, and it is very... Let me just read you select passages from it. If I could get away with it, that would be my keynote. Of all these books that I mentioned, this is the one you really should [get]. If you're only going to get one, make it this one: *Charity: The Place of the Poor in the Biblical Tradition*. It doesn't presume a lot of scholarly background. Yeah, you can just get right into it.

They kind of characterize this early, primitive Christian community, where these acts of charity are happening. It's important to remember what the economic conditions were at the time. This is the Roman Empire, people, it's 2,000 years ago. It's a pre-industrial society. The wealth is very, very highly concentrated. In the imperial family and the landed gentry, the aristocrats who own land. Everybody else rents land or works their land—*everybody* else, in one way or another. There is no middle class. It's really *the* wealthy and those who were getting by, and some were getting by better than others.

Social historians calculate that there were, about the time that we're talking about, 0.04% were made up of the imperial elite; 1% were the regional or provincial elites; 1.76% the municipal elites, the wealthy men and women who do not hold public office but play some role in the city; 7% have a moderate surplus of resources, that's some merchants, some traders, some free persons, some artisans; 22% are stable near-subsistence level, with a reasonable hope of remaining above the minimum level to sustain life; 40% are at subsistence level, and 28% are below subsistence. So this is a really shockingly low, shockingly poor world.

Although the poverty is greater in the countryside, it's great nonetheless in the cities as well. I want to make that point clear, because I want you to appreciate that the audience for this early Gospel, the congregations that Paul is writing to, the people that he's collecting—there aren't many people of the higher echelons that are in these groups. He's talking largely to people who are just getting by.

When the Church comes out from underground, when it becomes the preferred religion of the emperors, and people start coming into the Church because it's safe to do so and because it's expected at court, and not necessarily for purposes of conviction, but just because it's what people *do*, then you start getting the sermons that you'll find in the fourth century—St. John Chrysostom and St. Basil—the haranguing of the rich and the “How dare you? Don't you realize?” The really shockingly powerful and offensive-to-modern-ears sermons. I'm not going to be talking about those, but that tone is not present in the early varieties, because those people aren't present to hear them.

Now, how do the people understand their position in this? How did people understand? What's the biblical understanding for wealth and poverty? for the fact that so few have so much, and so many have so little? Is there an explanation for it, and is there a strategy for addressing it? No. There is no economic theory here. There is no grand design. But there are perspectives, and they range... I'm going to use four examples across a spectrum. The Book of Revelation, the Letter of James, Acts of the Apostles, and the *Shepherd of Hermas*. These kind of represent a range of understandings and stratagems for how to deal with wealth and poverty discrepancies.

If we start with the Book of Revelation, the system is satanic. The way things are is monstrous and beastly and an offense to God. The empire is a beast, and those who support the profit, who support the beast, the aristocratic families, they're all in collusion, and their day will come. The Lord will intervene and set things right. So there's a kind of a recognition of the horrible wrongness of the way things are and a vibrant hope and an expectation that God himself will come in and take care of it. It isn't a call to arms; it isn't a revolution. It doesn't advocate that *people* do anything. It says God's going to take care of it. It's in his design.

Look at the Epistle of James. James is the closest in temperament to the preachers of the fourth century, the Chrysostoms, the Basils, the people who attack, as it were, the wealthy. James is

largely saying, "This is the way things are. Don't play along with it. Recognize this is wrong, and live differently." A rich person comes into the congregation, you show him the seat of honor, because he's finely dressed, and you ignore your poor brother, who's dressed shabbily? Shame on you! That's not acceptable in this community. That's not what we're about. Those standards don't count. You're not to accept the status assigned to him by society based on his possessions and his wealth, and shame on that person if he doesn't recognize that he has obligations toward you.

I could read whole passages from James. They're actually kind of thrilling, too. Preached in front of the wrong audience, they can be really upsetting. Let me do that... You know, just to give you a flavor. James, by the way, I prefer to call him "Jacob, Iakovos." I don't know how... I think the translators of the King James Version preferred "James" so that King James would hear his name in Scripture, but his name is actually Iakovos. He is called the Brother of God, *Adelphotheos*. We kind of pull back a little and call him the Brother of our Lord, because "Brother of God" sounds a little powerful. But he's the first bishop of Jerusalem, who died a martyr's death.

This is from the second chapter.

My brethren, do not hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with partiality, for if there should come into your assembly a man with gold rings and fine apparel, and there should also come in a poor man in filthy clothes, and you pay attention to the one wearing the fine clothes and say to him, "You sit here, in a good place," and you say to the poor man, "You stand there, or sit there at my footstool," have you not shown partiality among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

Listen, my beloved brethren: has God not chosen the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which he promised to those who love him? But you have dishonored the poor man. Do not the rich oppress you and drag you into the courts? Do they not blaspheme that noble name by which you are called? If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," you do well, but if you show partiality, you commit sin, and are convicted by the Law as transgressors.

So "do they not drag you into court"? The courts are corrupt, too. The courts are in the pockets of the rich. The world, it's stacked against you. So there is a kind of class consciousness here, or an awareness that the wealthy get away with things, and you kiss up to them. Don't. He's not saying, "Arm yourselves. Steal their wealth. Burn down the cities," or any such thing, but he's saying, "Don't play along."

Chapter five:

Come now, you rich, weep and howl for your miseries that are coming upon you. Your riches are corrupted, and your garments are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver are corroded, and their corrosion will be a witness against you, and will eat your flesh like fire. You have heaped up treasure in the last days. Indeed, the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out, and the cries of the reaper have reached the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth. You have lived on the earth in pleasure and luxury. You have fattened your hearts as in a day of slaughter. You have condemned, you have murdered the just. He does not resist you. Therefore, be patient, brethren, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the

precious fruits of the earth, waiting patiently for it until it receives the early and latter rains? You also, be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand.

That's a little bit of that apocalyptic thing I was talking about in the Book of Revelation as well: "but you have fattened your hearts for the day of slaughter"? I read this to you so that you can get a sense of the temperament of the times, that it's manifestly wrong. But what do you do about it?

Let's turn to Acts of the Apostles, and to the passage that I started with, where, let me remind you, because it's been a little while now:

Now all who believed were together and had all things in common and sold their possessions and goods and divided them among all, as anyone had need. So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity, praising God and having favor with all the people.

They were together, had all things in common, sold their possessions and goods, divided them among all, as anyone had need. Is that what the author of Acts, who we'll call Luke, is that his solution? Is that what he's suggesting as the model Christian community?

I want also to be careful; I want to add a little caveat here. It's really tempting to go to these early texts to look for confirmation for our own political persuasion. We really have to work hard against that. You're going to find people who are trying to argue that communalism is the Christian model *par excellence*, and others will find passages that support a more individualistic way of dealing with issues of poverty. In fact, that's the case later in Acts of the Apostles. I'm just suggesting that we be very careful. This is a different world we're talking about. There are correspondences, but they're not necessarily tight. There's some specific things about this world that, thankfully, we don't experience nowadays, the [lack of the] large middle class being one of them.

But what about this, this kind of utopian vision of this primitive community, where everybody lives together, and no one says "mine"; everything is "ours" or "yours"? If it were the case that this is what Luke is advocating, you would expect to find this model replicated throughout the Christian world. You would expect this to be what Paul is setting up wherever he goes. And yet, you don't. Luke is already looking back on this as if it were a golden moment. It's already part of almost a "good ole days": "You remember, at the beginning, how sweet it was, back then, in Jerusalem, at Pentecost?" But he's not promoting that as the necessary elements of a Christian community.

In fact, the narrative strategy of Acts of the Apostles is a very interesting one. It goes from the Jewish milieu in Jerusalem, the early Church, and it ends with Paul in Rome, in the heart of Gentile-land, of pagan-world. As he goes, it's about early on the struggles with Jews, some who get it and some who don't, and then the transition to Gentiles, some who get it and some who don't, but the whole point of the book is to say: you don't have to be a Jew any more. It started that way, but the Church has grown beyond that now, and it's open to *you*, and it's right here in Rome.

Luke is taking us on a journey from this primitive communalism to something else, and along the way, he encounters individuals who show him *acts of charity*. This is not group charity. It's not systematic or communal. It's the opening of a home, the providing of a meal, the providing

of resources to get from one city to the next, accompanying along the way. There's a kind of a personalized charity. These eleemosynary kinds of acts are not part of group-think or group-act, but personal. So this is where I'm saying that you can find what you want in this record. You can emphasize the one-ness aspect, or you can emphasize the many-ness aspect, but I think it's very evident in Acts that Paul is, in a sense, appealing to an upper class, too, because the interactions, as the book proceeds, are with people of higher social status. So the message is: people like *you* come in, too. Governors and centurions and philosophers and people of worldly status are also part of this, are embraced by this Gospel.

Very interestingly, we know from Paul's letters that one of the principal purposes of his retracing his steps in [the] missionary field was to collect on promises made for material support for the Church in Palestine, in Jerusalem, because the Church in Jerusalem had experienced a famine—we're told about that in Acts of the Apostles—and conditions there were terrible for the faithful. St. Paul was, besides planting churches, collecting monies to take back to Jerusalem.

I'm speaking a little bit on the secular side here, not doing a spiritual reading, but Luke doesn't make a big point of this. He almost, as it were, suppresses it, because he doesn't want to maintain this tie to Judaism, it would seem to me. He wants to set Paul free in a Gentile world by the end of the book. So Paul is eager to go back to Jerusalem for Pentecost, we're told, but not to deliver the monies, but we know that that's why he went back. We know from the evidence of his letters. It's just an interesting point.

But the point that Paul is asking for this plays into what is the role of charity in the early Church? Is it about supporting one another in the local community and sharing everything with whoever happens to come in, or does it extend beyond the boundaries of the community? Is it being hospitable to whoever comes your way, as is the case with many of the encounters in Acts of the Apostles, or can it be more programmatic and directed, as seems to be the case with this collection for the Church in Jerusalem?

There are two chapters about this collection for Jerusalem in the Second Letter to the Corinthians, and at the risk of taxing your attention—have I gone on too long? [Audience member: No, another hour.] Oh my gosh. Let me read these two chapters to you, slowly. This is [II Corinthians 8-9](#). *Second* Corinthians. He's already been to Corinth. He's lived in Corinth for a year and a half. He lived in Corinth, and he knows these people, and he loves these people, very troublesome people, very confused in many ways. They need reminders and admonitions, but he's coming back to collect money. Check out his strategy here.

[Brethren, we make known to you the grace that God bestowed on the churches of Macedonia, that in a great deal of affliction, the abundance of their joy and their deep poverty abounded in the riches of their liberality. For I bear witness that according to their ability, yes, and beyond their ability, they were freely willing, imploring us with much urgency that we would receive the gift and the fellowship of the ministering to the saints, and not only as we had hoped, but they first gave themselves to the Lord and then to us by the will of God. So we urged Titus, that as he had begun, so he would also complete this grace in you as well.](#)

That is, he sent Titus ahead to revive their interest in this collection, which seems to have waned.

But as you abound in everything, in faith and speech and knowledge and all diligence and in your love for us, see that you abound in this grace also. I speak not by commandment, but I am testing the sincerity of your love by the diligence of others, for you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, for your sakes he became poor, that you, through his poverty, might become rich.

First of all, notice he's spurring them on by appealing to their sense of competition: "Wait till you see what I got from the Macedonians—and they're genuinely poor." So a very interesting manipulator, very psychologically astute here. Also notice: he never says "money." They gave their love, they gave their gift, they gave their... But he never says "money," but that's what he's talking about.

And in this, I give advice. It is to your advantage, not only to be doing what you began and were desiring to do a year ago, but now you must also complete the doing of it, that as there was a readiness to desire it, so also there may be a completion out of what you have. For if there is first a willing mind, it is accepted according to what one has and not according to what he does not have. For I do not mean that others should be eased and you burdened, but by an equality that now at this time your abundance may supply their lack, that their abundance also may supply your lack, that there may be equality. As it is written: He who gathered much had nothing left over, and he who gathered little had no lack.

But thanks be to God who puts the same earnest care for you into the heart of Titus, for he not only accepted the exhortation, but being more diligent, he went to you of his own accord, and we have sent with him the brother whose praise is in the Gospel throughout all the churches, and not only that, but who also was chosen by the churches to travel with us, with this gift, which is administered by us to the glory of the Lord himself and to show your ready mind, avoiding this, that anyone should blame us in this lavish gift which is administered by us, providing honorable things not only in the sight of the Lord but also in the sight of men.

And we have sent with them our brother, whom we have often provide diligent in many things, but now much more diligent because of the great confidence which we have in you. If anyone inquires about Titus, he is my partner and fellow worker concerning you, for if our brethren are inquired about, they are messengers of the churches, the glory of Christ. Therefore show to them and before the churches the proof of your love and of our boasting on your behalf.

Now, concerning the ministering to the saints, it is superfluous for me to write to you, for I know your willingness, about which I boast of you to the Macedonians, that Achaia was already a year ago, and your zeal was stirred up. Your zeal has stirred up the majority, yet I have sent the brethren lest our boasting of you should be in vain in this respect, that as I said you may be ready, lest if some Macedonians come with me and find you unprepared we, not to mention you, should be ashamed of this confident boasting. Therefore I thought it necessary to exhort the brethren to go to you ahead of time and prepare your generous gift beforehand which you had previously promised, that it may be ready as a matter of generosity and not as a grudging obligation.

But this I say: he who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. So let each one give as he purposes in his heart, not grudgingly or of necessity, for God loves a cheerful giver, and God is able to make all grace abound toward you, that you always having all sufficiency in all things may have an abundance for every good work. And as it is written: He has dispersed abroad, he has given to the poor, his righteousness endures forever. Now, may he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food supply and multiply the

seed you have sown and increase the fruits of your righteousness, while you are enriched in everything, for all liberality which causes thanksgiving through us to God.

God can give you so much, and he gives you so much so that *you* can give. That's the motivation here. And when you give, you're multiplying thanksgiving to God. People are receiving, and they're surviving because, at this time, it's your turn to provide, because you have a sufficiency, and they lack. When the circumstances are changed, don't worry: from their sufficiency, you will not suffer any lack. It's a rhythm; it's a flow. In the giving and this dispensing, people receive and say, "Thanks be to God." God is glorified in this.

We know that Catholics have a term for it. What is it? The preferential something for the poor. [Audience member speaks.] Preferential option for the poor. That Jesus, his scales were weighted, it seems, on the side of the poor. Parable after parable, it's the poor person that is the hero, as it were, kind of counter-intuitively. It must have surprised his audience to hear Jesus was always casting as his hero the social marginal figure, the outcast, the poor, the mixed breed, the Samaritan. He keeps company with morally compromised people, with tax collectors, with prostitutes—not with former prostitutes. With prostitutes.

Jesus is a very disruptive person, and confusing to many people. His take on the poor is confusing and disruptive. We're going to hear this Sunday, coming up, his parable of Lazarus and the rich man. In another couple Sundays—I love how it always seems to happen around our Thanksgiving, the Sunday before Thanksgiving, it seems to me—we're going to hear about the man who kept building warehouses to store his excess.

In both cases, what Jesus is critical of is the person with whom the gifts stop. The gifts are flowing, but they get clotted. They don't come down. They don't circulate as they should, because someone provides the clot of his ego. Somebody imagines that they're coming to him because of him, and that he has a right to them, more so than others did, and he allows them to accumulate, which is what James was critical of. He said, "Your garments will be moth-eaten, and your goods will be corroded, because you're not *using* them. You're stockpiling them."

I'm going to go to the last of my four examples. I think I've used more than four, but along the spectrum I had: Revelation over here, and then I had James, and then I have Acts, and now I'm going to go to the *Shepherd of Hermas*. If you're not very familiar with the *Shepherd of Hermas*, it's a strange series of visions and dreams and parables that... it's odd, but there's a lot of interesting teaching embedded in it. I'm going to read you a couple of passages that are of importance for the period that I'm talking about. Let's see.

Now, the *Shepherd of Hermas*, he's talking about wealth here, and he's demonstrating its ambiguity. Wealth can bring difficulties. It can tempt one to renounce the faith in pursuit of it. It can be a distraction. It can tempt one to avoid persecution, because one is accustomed to the comfort that wealth brings. So it's an ambiguous blessing, and it must be used properly. Here's one of the parables that he has.

In "Similitude 1," this section, a heavenly messenger who looks like a shepherd tells Hermas a parable. In the parable, the life of a believer of the world is compared to the life of a slave of God living in a foreign city. In the foreign city, which is life in this world, the slave (that is, a believer) should not rely on possessions or wealth, but the slave could be expelled at any time, and these goods would be left behind. A proper course of action is frugal self-sufficiency

(*aftarkeia*). The simple lifestyle allows one to use the remaining foreign wealth to help widows and orphans, which, in the logic of the parable, is equivalent to buying goods in one's native city, heaven, that cannot be confiscated. Okay, let me read you the passage.

Instead of fields, then, purchase souls that have been afflicted insofar as you can, and take care of widows and orphans, and do not neglect them. Spend your wealth and all your furnishings, for such fields and houses as you have received from God, for this is why the Master made you rich, that you may carry out these ministries for him. It is much better to purchase the fields, goods, and houses you find in your own city when you return to it. This kind of extravagance is good and makes one glad. It has no grief or fear, but joy instead. So do not participate in the extravagance sought by outsiders, for it is no profit for you who are slaves of God.

So his point is that charity is the proper use of wealth, and God has given people wealth precisely for charitable purposes. Then he goes on to use an even more... This is a very... Well, I'll just read it. He talks about young elm trees that support grape vines, and he compares them to the relationship of the rich and poor in the assemblies.

The elm trees (he says) are the rich, and the grape vines symbolize the poor. The elm tree only appears to be fruitless. If the elm supports the vine, the vine is able to grow fruit because it is off the ground, and it is able to draw moisture from the elm in times of drought. And so when the vine attaches to the elm, it bears fruit both for itself and because of the elm. So you see that the elm also gives much fruit, no less than the vine, but rather more.

So what he's saying is that the wealthy make possible the fruit-bearing of the poor. By supporting the poor, what good the poor do, as a result of their support, redounds on the wealthy. So he's trying to create a strategy where the wealthy see that it's in their interest to support the poor, because—and this is where this thing all eventually comes out—when you support the poor, you're investing in yourself, in your real self, in your eternal self. They're using the language that a wealthy person will understand, to try to convince him to take on a practice that might become intuitive to him.

You know the well-used tripartite characterization of the believer. I don't know if it goes back to St. John Cassian or St. John Chrysostom, but it's widely used: that in the beginning, one serves God out of fear of punishment, and that's the mentality of the slave; with time, one comes to do things with the expectation of reward, and that's the mentality of the servant; but with time, once one has acclimated himself to doing good things, he does the good because it's good, and he does it for its own sake, and those people are God's friends. So we go from a fearful, slave mentality to a freely-giving, friend-of-God mentality, and it's hoped that this would be an inducement to get people to come in: You will benefit in the long run. The money you give to the poor is not money lost. It's money that will come back to you in heaven.

We hear that in Christ himself, in the parable of the rich fool, and he says, "Where your treasure is, there was your heart. You fool, you're going to leave all this behind. You were rich in the sight of man, but poor in the sight of God. What did you do to make yourself rich in the sight of God?"

Interestingly, about that parable—I'm leaping back about that—next time you hear it, count how many times you hear *I*, *me*, and *mine*. See how many people are in that man's world. A rich man said to himself, "I will plough my... I will harvest my fields, and I will collect my goods, and I will do that, and I will say to myself, 'Self...' " I mean, he's totally [alone]. There's nobody else in

his world, and that's the trap of wealth, is what Jesus seems to be saying, just as in the parable of Lazarus and the rich man that we're going to hear. What's so revolutionary about that? We know Lazarus' name; we don't know the rich man's name.

It's that total reversal of expectations. The poor are anonymous in this world. The rich are the ones we follow. They're on the cover of magazines, and they're on *Entertainment Weekly*. We know everything about the Kardashians and the whoever and whatever. We don't know about the people we pass on the street. Well, *that's* the hero in this story.

Let's see what else I've got. [Audience member speaks.] I can, can't I? Okay, but let me just... I mentioned the *Didachē*. Let me just give you a couple of things from the *Didachē*, and with that I'll close. This is, to give you a sense that the acts of charity that are being drawn out of the community, the appeal is not being made to the rich of the community; it's being made peer-to-peer. It's, in a sense, the poor are being asked to support the poorer. This is a beautiful passage from the *Didachē*.

Do not be one who stretches out his hand to receive, but shuts when it comes to giving. Of whatever you have gained by your hand, you shall give a ransom for your sins. You shall not hesitate to give, nor shall you grumble when you give, for you shall know who is the good Paymaster of the reward. You shall not turn away the needy, but shall share everything with your sibling, and shall not say it is your own, for if you are sharers in the imperishable, how much more in the things which perish?

For the Father wants people to give, every one from the gifts that have been freely granted to them. Blessed is the one who gives according to the commandment, for that one is guiltless. Woe to one who receives. If anyone takes when in need, then that one is guiltless, but if that one is not in need, they shall have to give an account of why they took. If they were imprisoned, they shall be interrogated about what they have done, and shall not go free until they have paid the last penny. But concerning this, it is also said that your alms sweat into your hands until you know to whom you are giving.

So there's a kind of a responsible giving, too. He's been talking to people who have little. *Give*, but give where it will make a difference. Now that's not the only teaching. St. Paul, as you heard, said, "Scatter. Go out. Widely. It's not for you to judge the worthiness of the person whom you're giving to. Just sow." We're not trying to say there's a strict party line here, but we're just saying that there's evidence here that these communities are supporting themselves when they are just barely making it themselves. But that's not an excuse not to give. There's always somebody...

Here's where I'll end. This is obviously from one of Christ's most powerful parables, [Matthew 23](#), the separating of the sheep and the goats: In giving, you encounter Christ. The poor are your portal into the kingdom. The poor provide you with an opportunity to worship Christ, not in an abstract way, but in a flesh-and-blood way. When you minister to the poor, you're ministering to Christ. Thank you.