



ON FASTING & ALMSGIVING

Saint John Chrysostom¹

FASTING IS A GOOD THING, just as it is good to read Scripture, when, that is, your reading is followed by actual deeds, for if you read Scripture but do not do what it says, you read unto your own judgment and punishment. For Scripture itself says: *It is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but it is the doers of the law who will be made righteous*; and Christ himself says: *If I had not come and spoken to them, they would have no sin, but now they have no excuse for their sin*. Blessed, then, is he who speaks into the ears of those who hear, especially when their hearing generates spiritual interest and dividends, by which I mean obedience and the keeping of God’s commandments, just as the Lord says: *So that when I come, I would have received my own with interest*. Tell me, then, brother, what have you earned from your fasting? For even the farmer sows that he might reap; and the merchant travels, that he might collect money; and the sailor crosses many seas, that he might fill his ship with goods.

Rom 2:13

John 15:22

Mt 25:27

Don’t say to me: “I have fasted for so many days! I have not eaten! I have not drunk wine! I have gone without bathing!” Show me instead that, being wrathful, you became meek; and being cruel, you became compassionate. If you are intoxicated with wrath, to what end do you afflict your flesh? If you are filled with envy and covetousness, what benefit is there in drinking only water? I am not concerned with what is on your table, but whether your evil disposition has been transformed.



SAINT
JOHN

CHRYSO
STOM

¹ The Greek text may be found in PG 48:1059-1062 (CPG 4502).

If the mistress, by which I mean the soul, commits fornication, why do you whip her handmaid, by which I mean the stomach? If it is the soul that has gone astray, why do you oppress the body?

I say this not to condemn you, but for the sake of those who are negligent. You know that, whenever I see you taking wing, I desire you to fly still higher, for such is the tyranny of love. And just as lovers of money are never sated with gathering gold, I too always desire your spiritual progress. Therefore, brother, if you wish to be received by God, fast as the Ninevites. They did not receive the Law, as Paul said: *For when the nations who have not the Law do, by nature, the things of the Law, they are a Law to themselves, though they have not the Law.* Do not, then, render the fast futile, because fasting does not ascend to heaven by itself but only when it has almsgiving as its sister and companion. And she is not only her sister and companion, but also a conveyance. And how do we know this? Because the angel said to Cornelius: *Your prayers and your almsgiving have ascended as a memorial before God.*

Almsgiving is thus the wing of prayer. If you do not provide your prayer with wings, it will never fly. When, however, your soul sprouts wings, it flies immediately to heaven. How long will the love of money and the desire for possessions last? All those things, brother, last no longer than the present life. But you will say to me, "Say these things to yourself!" And indeed I do say these things to myself, and also to you, because this is advice for everybody. When I myself hear these things and amend my ways, then I am benefited by you. Even if it is a slave who says these things, I would still take the advice; and if it is a free man, I listen eagerly, because it is not a person's station in life but the utility of the advice that makes me accept their words. For if that great Moses, who spoke with God, did not shun the advice of his father-in-law, though he was a barbarian, but to the contrary received his advice, which was confirmed by God, how much more should we? I am not telling you to give away everything you own, but from your surplus to give to the poor, so that your surplus may become the foundation of your salvation.

Surely you see the multitudes of poor people in the street, how they remain outdoors even though they are sick or naked? Some are younger, some

are older, some of them are leaning on one another for support—how great is their misfortune! Give, therefore, to your fellow servants, so that you might have the Master in your debt, for he gladly becomes your debtor and pays back your investment with interest. For whereas usury is a crime practiced by the heathen, with God it is praiseworthy. Will you not give to the poor? Consider who it is that begs of you through the poor man and attend to the dignity of the one who receives. Yes, the poor man receives, but it is God who is the borrower. Understand to what depths the Master descended to accomplish this, so that he might turn you back from cruelty and hatred: *For you saw me hungry, and you did not feed me; thirsty, and you did not give me to drink; a stranger, and you did not welcome me; naked, and you did not clothe me.* Will you not therefore give to Christ in his hunger? Both you and the poor man together partake of his body from the altar table. You both likewise partake of his holy cup. Christ grants you to commune in his great and fearful mysteries, and yet you do not share your small and paltry things with him? Will you not give him *thine own*?² For even if you received them from your parents or your grandparents, they belong to God. Why, then, do you bury them in the earth?

Mt 25:35-40

cf. Mt 25:18

Give what you have to the poor and the Master will guard them for you with the greatest security. Do you not see what farmers do? Often, when they lack seed on account of their poverty, they pawn their clothes and receive what they lacked and entrust it to the earth. Even though they have often experienced unseasonable weather and have left their fields without reaping anything, they nonetheless entrust it to the earth in hope. Is the Master therefore not able to do what the earth does? Imitate, then, that widow in the Old Testament, who had a handful of flour in a jar and a little oil in a jug and with these things showed hospitality to the prophet. Or imitate the widow in the Gospel who surpassed all the others when she cast her two pennies, for she surrendered the entirety of her wealth.

3 Kg 17:7-16^{LXX}

cf. Mk 12:42

But you, what do you say? “I am poor and have no money.” Do you not have two pennies? And even if you do not have two pennies, God seeks the

2 The author continues the Eucharistic analogy by alluding to a phrase from the Divine Liturgy: “Thine own of thine own.”

abundance of your good will. This is why he says: *Whoever gives a cup of cold water will not lose his reward.* Do you see what he is saying? Cold water, not warm, lest you be deprived of your reward on account of the cost of wood for the fire. When a king demands gold from you, no matter how much he wants—threatening to tie you up and hang you—you give him what he wants. Even if you are poor, he pays no attention to the means that different people have, but he seeks only his own gain. But God is not like this, for he asks only in proportion to our means.

Why, then, are there poor people? Is God not able to rain down gold upon them? But the poor are with you so that their poverty might serve for you as a propitiation of sins. *A great thing is man, but a merciful man is precious indeed.* See how great almsgiving is? God identifies the merciful man with himself: *Be compassionate, he says, as your heavenly Father is compassionate.*

We know that when death comes, your money remains here. Why, then, do you not send it *there* to yourself in advance, so that, on the Day of Judgment, the poor will stand by your side where you will have no lawyer or advocate. Pointing to their clothing and head coverings, the poor will snatch you from the fire. Even the sun rising over ice does not cause it to melt as much as almsgiving, which, when it descends on a multitude of sins, causes them to vanish utterly.

So that you might learn the sublimity of almsgiving, ask yourself what is more difficult than virginity? Nothing. There are many virtues, some great, some higher, and some lower, but there is none more difficult than virginity. It wrestles against nature itself. It is a war that knows no relief. It is a battle that is never calmed except by the mercy of Christ. A virgin brings the furnace to herself and is not burned. A virgin stands on coals and is not scorched. Being in the furnace, she is not harmed by the flames but is bedewed like the three youths. Rivaling the invisible powers of heaven, the virgin imitates Michael and approaches the rank of Gabriel. In paradise there was virginity, but it was corrupted by the dragon. This is why it was not seen in the intervening years that followed. But when Jesus Christ, the Son of God, came, who was born of a virgin, then virginity appeared once again. Do you wish to

know the greatness of virginity? Moses parted the sea, changed the air, and brought down manna from heaven, and yet he was slandered on account of his wife, the Ethiopian woman, because he had married. And this happened to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, too—and even to Joseph, who, though he was chaste, nevertheless (even after all this) had a wife. Do you wish to learn how great virginity is? When Christ came, he did not make it mandatory. When he commanded the other virtues, he did not command this one, so that, if anyone should adopt it voluntarily, he would be crowned. Thus, those who practice the ascetic way of life adopt this form of poverty before all else. And *there are eunuchs who were born that way; and there are eunuchs who were made eunuchs by men; and there are eunuchs who made themselves eunuchs for the sake for the kingdom of the heavens*, not by cutting off their bodily members, but by cutting off unbridled desire. *Let him that can accept this, accept it.* The Apostle, too, enumerating all the virtues and seeing their multitude says: *About virgins I have no commandment of the Lord.*

cf. Num 12:1

Mt 9:12

1 Cor 7:25

Do you see how great virginity is? And yet without almsgiving virginity offers no salvation, whereas almsgiving without virginity brings salvation. The five foolish virgins, who had virginity but no oil for their lamps, did not enter into the bridal chamber. To the wise virgins they said: *Give us of your oil.* And justly were they shut out because they adopted what was more difficult but failed to do what required no effort at all. They conquered the stronger opponent but were defeated by the weaker one. Thus, when the bridegroom came, the wise virgins entered into the bridal chamber, but when the others came crying, he said to them: *I do not know you. Why? For you saw me hungry and did not feed me.*

Mt 25:8

Mt 25:12, 42

May we never hear those words! But to those who have taken up almsgiving, he says: *Come, you blessed of my Father: inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.* Why is this? Was it because they preserved their virginity? Not at all. It was because: *I was hungry, and you gave me to eat. I was thirsty, and you gave me to drink. I was a stranger, and you welcomed me; naked, and you clothed me; sick and in prison, and you visited me.*

Mt 25:34

Mt 25:35-36

That you might learn how great almsgiving is, I would remind you yet again of the story. There were ten virgins, of whom five were wise and five were foolish. And then a voice was heard in the middle of the night: “Arise, the bridegroom is coming!” The middle of the night is the Resurrection, when the angels will raise us all up. Rising up, the virgins trimmed their lamps. Now the lamp is virginity: that which is pure, clear, and bright. The foolish virgins therefore said to the wise: *Give us of your oil. But the wise virgins said to them: We fear lest there not be enough for both ourselves and you*—and they did not say this because they were selfish, for in that place there is no sharing of wealth, neither is there rich or poor—*rather, go forth and buy some*. And who are they that sell it? Surely the poor!

Mt 25:9

As for you, would you not rather receive than give? Then give Christ what is earthly, and you will receive what is heavenly. But when the foolish virgins went away to buy, the bridegroom came, and those who were prepared entered the bridal chamber, and the doors were shut. When they returned, they cried out, and he said to them: *I do not know you*. Do you see what happened? Since they had no almsgiving, they lost even the labor of virginity and remained outside the bridal chamber.

Having therefore learned the advantage of almsgiving, brethren, let us practice giving alms, that we may enter the bridal chamber and enjoy the eternal good things, by the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, with whom we glorify the Father, together with his holy, good, and life-creating Spirit, now and ever and unto the ages of ages. Amen.³



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