

Almsgiving

Perhaps the most overlooked aspect of Great Lent is the need to include almsgiving. The spiritual life can be viewed as a seat held up by three legs: prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. If any of the legs is taken away, the whole seat will fall!

Before sending his son Tobias out into the world, Tobit gives him specific instructions about almsgiving:

“Do almsgiving from your possessions to all who do righteousness. When you do almsgiving, do not let your eye be envious. Do not turn your face away from any poor man, so the face of God will not be turned away from you. Do almsgiving based on the quantity of your possessions. If you possess only a few, do not be afraid to give according to the little that you have. You are storing up a good treasure for yourself in the day of necessity. For almsgiving delivers us from death and prevents us from entering into darkness. Indeed, almsgiving is a good gift for all who it before the Most High.” – Tobit 4:7-11

In the city of Memphis, you can drive around and find ample opportunity to give alms to those in need. If you are having a hard time finding a place to give, look simply at those closest to you. The following article by Dn. Charles Joiner is a small section from his “10 Point Program for Living an Orthodox Christian Life.” Putting others first, as Dn. Charles encourages, is a great place to begin this life-saving quality of Great Lent, almsgiving!

Putting Others First

Dn. Charles Joiner

As you begin to slow down your life, reorder your priorities, become more watchful, and gain freedom from the chains of your likes and dislikes, you will also begin to see changes taking place in your relationships.

It is selfless relationships that lead us to happiness and a life close to God. This is what Christ meant when He asked us to love our neighbor as ourselves. You cannot act as an isolated being and be close to God. When you dwell on yourself you only build a wall between yourself, others and God. Those who insist on thinking about their own needs, their wants, plans and ideas only become lonely and feel insecure. They separate themselves from God.

A powerful approach to learning to love is to practice putting others first. You can begin with your own family and close friends and coworkers. As you try to understand the needs of your spouse or best friend, and to begin to consider their needs before you insist on your own, you will find that you move closer together. This kind of action weakens the negative aspect of your ego-centeredness and opens deeper relationships with others.

There is a ripple effect that begins with your closest relationships. As your closest relationships grow, you will find that those further removed will also grow closer. Your love ripples outward. At the same time you will find yourself growing closer to God. So, begin this practice with those who are closest to you.

Most of us find that we are all puffed up by our ego. We see the world based on what we like and dislike. We think everyone has the same hopes and fears, likes and dislikes that we do. Too often we expect others to behave just like ourselves. But, when they don't and they expect us to act the way they do, we run into conflicts. This is the reality of the world. Try to allow yourself to think in the way others think, to appreciate their likes and dislikes, to look at things from their perspective. Then you will find that your relationships blossom.

The block to knowing God is the same as the one that blocks us from loving others. It is our self-will. We grow spiritually when we learn how to eliminate our self-will. This is the aim of putting others first. This is the example that Christ has set out before us. This is the accomplishment of the Saints of the Church. This is what Jesus meant when He said, "If you want to find your life, you have to lose it." One of the two great commandments He gave us is to love your neighbor as yourself. Why? Because he wants us to be able to love Him. God is present in all of us, and when we love each other we are loving God. It is through our love of others that we can come to know the love of God.

The ability to put others first demands patience—a calm and controlled mind. This virtue only comes with a disciplined life based on a foundation of daily prayer where you gain strength to control your passions and get beyond your own likes and dislikes. Continually ask for God's mercy and His help to overcome your self-willed nature. When you are patient and able to think of the needs of others, an unkind word will not agitate you and

trigger anger. As you become more watchful and your life more ordered, then you can support others even when they are angry with you.

You can practice putting others first even at work. Learn to accept that others may have good ideas even if they are different from your own. When you no longer expect everyone to be and think like yourself, and when you recognize their likes and dislikes without judgment, you will begin to build loving relationships at work. In fact, work is a great place to get rid of the sharp edges of your personality. As you learn to love in the work environment, your example will be seen by others for the benefit of all.

Some will say that putting others first will only make you like a door mat and subject you to abuse. This is not what putting others first is about. You do not automatically say yes to everything others want. What we are saying is to put the other person's welfare before your own desires, not necessarily all their wants. There are times when it is in the best interests of the other person to say no. And there are other times when we say yes even when it goes against one of our own desires, because we know it is what is best for them. This is the essence of godly love. You are putting others first when the other person's welfare means more than your own desires.

It is like the love a mother naturally has for her infant child. This is the sacrifice that Christ made on the Cross. He willingly gave His own life for our salvation. Often in a relationship it is necessary to say "no" when we know it is not in the best interests of the other person and "yes" when it does not meet our own desires. You can also mend broken relationships with love. It is the act of forgiveness that is the most powerful healing power. Forgiveness makes both parties whole. When you forgive those who have done wrong to you, you also forgive yourself for your wrongs of the past. This brings up another benefit we have in the Church: the sacrament of Confession. In this sacrament you can ask God to cleanse you of all your past transgressions, all the cases where you were not able to control your passions and master your self-centeredness. In this sacrament not only are you cleansed by the Holy Spirit, but you also gain spiritual advice, a penance, to help you overcome the passion that you find most difficult to control. When you "clear the deck," when you humble yourself before God and admit your weaknesses, you open yourself to become more understanding of the struggles of others and become more willing to forgive them. As you forgive others you are more able to forgive yourself. As you do this you will find you are more able to put others first. The result is that we all come closer to God.