

Objection 1. It would seem that corporal alms are of more account than spiritual alms. For it is more praiseworthy to give an alms to one who is in greater want, since an almsdeed is to be praised because it relieves one who is in need. Now the body which is relieved by corporal alms, is by nature more needy than the spirit which is relieved by spiritual alms. Therefore corporal alms are of more account.

Objection 2. Further, an alms is less praiseworthy and meritorious if the kindness is compensated, wherefore Our Lord says (Lk. 14:12): “When thou makest a dinner or a supper, call not thy neighbors who are rich, lest perhaps they also invite thee again. Now there is always compensation in spiritual almsdeeds, since he who prays for another, profits thereby, according to Ps. 34:13: “My prayer shall be turned into my bosom: and he who teaches another, makes progress in knowledge, which cannot be said of corporal almsdeeds. Therefore corporal almsdeeds are of more account than spiritual almsdeeds.

Objection 3. Further, an alms is to be commended if the needy one is comforted by it: wherefore it is written (Job 31:20): “If his sides have not blessed me,” and the Apostle says to Philemon (verse 7): “The bowels of the saints have been refreshed by thee, brother.” Now a corporal alms is sometimes more welcome to a needy man than a spiritual alms. Therefore bodily almsdeeds are of more account than spiritual almsdeeds.

On the contrary, Augustine says (De Serm. Dom. in Monte i, 20) on the words, “Give to him that asketh of thee” (Mat. 5:42): “You should give so as to injure neither yourself nor another, and when you refuse what another asks you must not lose sight of the claims of justice, and send him away empty; at times indeed you will give what is better than what is asked for, if you reprove him that asks unjustly.” Now reproof is a spiritual alms. Therefore spiritual almsdeeds are preferable to corporal almsdeeds.

I answer that, There are two ways of comparing

these almsdeeds. First, simply; and in this respect, spiritual almsdeeds hold the first place, for three reasons. First, because the offering is more excellent, since it is a spiritual gift, which surpasses a corporal gift, according to Prov. 4:2: “I will give you a good gift, forsake not My Law.” Secondly, on account of the object succored, because the spirit is more excellent than the body, wherefore, even as a man in looking after himself, ought to look to his soul more than to his body, so ought he in looking after his neighbor, whom he ought to love as himself. Thirdly, as regards the acts themselves by which our neighbor is succored, because spiritual acts are more excellent than corporal acts, which are, in a fashion, servile.

Secondly, we may compare them with regard to some particular case, when some corporal alms excels some spiritual alms: for instance, a man in hunger is to be fed rather than instructed, and as the Philosopher observes (Topic. iii, 2), for a needy man “money is better than philosophy,” although the latter is better simply.

Reply to Objection 1. It is better to give to one who is in greater want, other things being equal, but if he who is less needy is better, and is in want of better things, it is better to give to him: and it is thus in the case in point.

Reply to Objection 2. Compensation does not detract from merit and praise if it be not intended, even as human glory, if not intended, does not detract from virtue. Thus Sallust says of Cato (Catilin.), that “the less he sought fame, the more he became famous”: and thus it is with spiritual almsdeeds.

Nevertheless the intention of gaining spiritual goods does not detract from merit, as the intention of gaining corporal goods.

Reply to Objection 3. The merit of an almsgiver depends on that in which the will of the recipient rests reasonably, and not on that in which it rests when it is inordinate.