

Giving to be forgiven: Alms in the Bible

by [Gary A. Anderson](#) in the [September 4, 2013](#) issue



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It is widely assumed that forgiveness in the Bible is a yes or no proposition. One is either forgiven or not—end of question. In certain Protestant circles this is often associated with what is known as the “forensic” theory of the atonement. On this view, forgiveness is likened to a judge declaring an accused party innocent. The legal declaration depends not on the spiritual constitution of the forgiven but on the authority of the judge.

This view is at considerable variance from the view of Christians who emphasize the process of sanctification. Forgiveness in this context is not so much a forensic declaration as a process. It begins at baptism with the infusion of justifying grace but presses on toward the complete transformation of the individual. It is not, in any sense of the word, a simple yes or no proposition; it is not the “cheap grace” that Dietrich Bonhoeffer worried about. Salvation entails shedding the old Adam in favor of the new.

But it is important to emphasize that this does not mean that God’s grace is active solely at conversion and afterward the person presses forward on her own—though

the Catholic-cum-Wesleyan tradition has often been accused of this Pelagian tendency. Rather, God's grace is understood to have spurred the will of the individual at conversion and continued to enable her to make those choices that lead to sanctification. To paraphrase St. Augustine: Command of me, O God, whatever you will, but give me the grace to pull it off.

Perhaps the best place to see the way in which this process works in the Bible is in the story of David. As careful readers of the books of Samuel have long noted, God's choice of David as his anointed comes at the cost of the rejection of Saul. On the face of it, one might think that this choice was decidedly unfair because David does not seem to be a character worthy of the office God has bestowed upon him. Saul, to be sure, has his faults—he twice violates the ritual commands that the prophet Samuel gives him (1 Sam. 13 and 15)—but these sins seem minor compared with those of David. In the event that will define his tenure as king, David spies Bathsheba bathing outdoors, has her summoned to his quarters and sleeps with her; then, when he learns she has become pregnant, he has her husband murdered to cover his tracks. An unhappy chain of events to say the least. How could God prefer David over Saul?

The only way to make sense of what the Bible is doing here is to attend not to the sins themselves but to how these two kings respond to the reprimands made by their respective prophets. In Saul's case, the chief concern is personal vanity. Though he has the good sense to admit straightaway that he has failed ("I have sinned; for I have transgressed the commandment of the Lord and your words"), he qualifies the nature of his fault by foisting blame on his soldiers ("I feared the people and obeyed their voice" [1 Sam. 15:24]). He then begs Samuel to accompany him to the altar to worship their Lord. When Samuel refuses, Saul reaches out to pull him back but instead catches his robe and tears a piece from it. The reader is taken aback by this sort of desperation.

When David is confronted by Nathan, he, too, is condemned for his deeds, and in far harsher terms. Speaking in God's voice, the prophet tells David that a host of evils shall now bedevil him the remainder of his days in the royal office. David immediately confesses, as Saul had done, and Nathan rescinds the penalty of death that was David's due, but the other consequences of David's misdeeds cannot be so easily dismissed.

As the story unfolds, we learn that his tempestuous relationship with his son Absalom leads to a successful coup d'état. In order to solidify his reign, Absalom gathers all of David's women onto the roof of the royal palace in order to sleep with them in full view of those in the city. David, meanwhile, flees the city in fear for his life.

What is striking is the attitude of David as he makes his way down from Mount Zion into the Kidron Valley and then ascends the Mount of Olives, from which he turns eastward toward the Jordan Valley. He does not begrudge his lot in any way, shape or form. All that is unfolding, he realizes, is the consequence of his own shameful actions.

Two moments in particular are quite revealing as to the state of his soul. First, the priests who have been in the employ of David are naturally anxious about the loss of their sacerdotal responsibilities. Chief among them would be service of the Ark of the Covenant, the most sacred object within the Tent of Meeting.

Zadok, the chief priest of that time, takes care to fetch the ark before the exodus from the city and brings it to David as he heads east out of the city. But David is not pleased by his efforts. "Carry the ark of God back into the city," he commands. "If I find favor in the eyes of the Lord, he will bring me back and let me see both it and the place where it stays. But if he says, 'I take no pleasure in you,' here I am, let him do to me what seems good to him" (2 Sam. 15:25-26).

Scholars have long noted the parallels of these lines to those of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. Each speaker is eager to do his Lord's bidding, even at the highest possible cost to his own person. And both submit themselves to God's providence while following identical paths out of the holy city. David is to be especially commended for the way in which he puts his entire future as Israel's king in the hands of his God; this was the sort of piety God had hoped for when he took the risk of appointing a king back in the opening chapters of 1 Samuel. It was not the sort of piety that Saul was capable of displaying.

The second moment comes when David makes his way over the summit of the Mount of Olives. There he is met by Shimei, an opponent of David's from the beginning of his royal rule. As David marches along with his able warriors on both his left and his right, Shimei lunges forward and curses David: "Out! Out! Murderer! Scoundrel! The Lord has avenged on all of you the blood of the house of Saul, in

whose place you have reigned . . . See, disaster has overtaken you; for you are a man of blood” (2 Sam. 16:7-8). Not satisfied with expressing his contempt in words alone, he throws stones and flings dirt at David and those gathered beside him.

David’s military advisers are understandably shocked at this rude behavior and, noticing the vulnerability of this fellow, seek David’s permission to do him in. But David will hear none of it. “My own son seeks my life,” David reasons; “how much more now may this Benjaminite! Let him alone, and let him curse; for the Lord has bidden him.”

One stands in amazement at the response of David. He is the bearer of an eternal promise of God (2 Sam. 7). He knows, in a way Saul never did, that his throne is invulnerable. Yet in spite of this (or precisely because of it?), David will not use his favor with God as a pretext for exempting himself from the humiliating consequences of his sins. David proves himself worthy of the high calling that God has granted him by virtue of his indifference to the perquisites of that office.

But we can say more. Though Nathan had rescinded the penalty of death that threatened David, not all the consequences of his actions could be undone. The effects of sin endure long after their perpetration. One can take consolation in being forgiven, but one should not confuse forgiveness with the process of spiritual repair. Though one could say that David had to pay the full price for his sin, it would be misleading to leave it at that, as though the punishment David had to endure was similar to a wayward adolescent taking his licks in the woodshed. For God’s punishment is never solely punitive in effect.

The pain that David must endure is nothing other than the logical consequence of what he has done, and by submitting to this terrible moment of humiliation, David allows himself to be refashioned in the image of the God he longs to serve. Fleeing the city and humiliated by his adversaries, David puts his future solely in the hands of God. “If I find favor in the eyes of the Lord,” David confesses, “he will bring me back” (2 Sam. 15:25). Put simply: not my will, Lord, but thine.

For someone committed to a forensic understanding of the atonement, the story of David’s penance will remain an enigma. For according to this theory, once Nathan pronounced the words of absolution, the matter should have been closed. God had acted; human deeds can make no material contribution to the process. But for those beholden to a robust doctrine of sanctification, every detail in this story about David

can be pondered and savored. Salvation is not limited to the punctiliar experience of forgiveness or justification (being declared “innocent”); it involves gradual moral and spiritual transformation—something like purgatory for David, at least in this world.

One of the shortcomings of the example of David is that one might get the idea that sanctification is simply a process of coming to terms with the effects that one’s sins have had on oneself and others. David’s role in the narrative we examined is in many respects passive; he must patiently await what Nathan has prophesied to come about in order to demonstrate his spiritual growth. But the Bible knows of another, more activist strategy—the giving of alms. In order to understand how this comes about, we need to consider how sins are understood in the later sections of the Old Testament.

At the close of the Old Testament period and on into the New, the predominant metaphor is that of a debt. So the famous words of the Our Father, “Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors,” or the many stories that Jesus tells about forgiveness that involve debtors and creditors.

On this understanding, when one sins, one incurs a debt to God, and forgiveness will involve the repayment of what is owed. The means of repayment will vary depending on the story that we consult, but one particularly esteemed means of paying down the debt can be through charity to the poor.

There are a number of reasons one could give for the high esteem that almsgiving has enjoyed in the Christian tradition. But pride of place should go to scriptural precedent: when King Nebuchadnezzar approaches the prophet Daniel in deep contrition over his errors, he pleads for a way to make amends. Daniel famously advises: “Pay off the debt you owe for your sins through charity toward the poor” (4:27). (Nebuchadnezzar, we might add, was the model penitent sinner in early Christian homiletic literature for obvious reasons: if this heinous sinner could be forgiven, then anyone could.)

The novelty of Daniel’s advice should not escape us. Here is a major revolution in the way in which the Bible understands sin. Whereas David had to make amends for what he had done by graciously enduring the consequences, Nebuchadnezzar was given the option of taking active steps in the repair of his own soul. Forgiveness was no longer dependent on one’s awaiting what the future might bring, but could be

achieved by putting into effect a set of spiritual disciplines revealed by God.

Traditionally, Protestant interpreters have been uncomfortable with the advice Daniel provides because it seems to convey a form of “works righteousness.” Nebuchadnezzar is able to buy his way out through his acts of charity. But in order to blunt these worries, we need to recall how the Bible understands almsgiving. For the Bible, charity to the poor is an act of mercy that generates a merit.

St. Augustine would have had no trouble with this improbable juxtaposition of grace and merit. He believed that grace enabled human beings to participate in the work of God. Though they win merits for themselves, the merits are nothing other than gifts in the first place.

A close analogy might be the young girl who buys a Christmas gift for her mother with all her allowance money. From one perspective it is no gift at all; the mother simply gets back what she provided in the first place. But from another perspective the gift allows the child to participate in the exchange of love that is basic to the family itself. Augustine expresses the same notion from a more theological vantage point when he writes: “You [O, God] are glorified in the assembly of your Holy Ones, for in crowning their merits you are crowning your own gifts.”

The book of Daniel shows how almsgiving pays down the debt of sin. But the Bible teaches us another important lesson about the power of almsgiving—its ability to deliver one from death (Prov. 10:2). In order to see this in bold relief, let’s take a look at the story of the raising of Tabitha in the book of Acts.

Now in Joppa there was a disciple whose name was Tabitha, which in Greek is Dorcas. *She was devoted to good works and acts of charity.* At that time she became ill and died. When they had washed her, they laid her in a room upstairs. Since Lydda was near Joppa, the disciples, who heard that Peter was there, sent two men to him with the request, “Please come to us without delay.” So Peter got up and went with them; and when he arrived, they took him to the room upstairs. *All the widows stood beside him, weeping and showing tunics and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was with them.* Peter put all of them outside, and then he knelt down and prayed. He turned to the body and said, “Tabitha, get up.” Then she opened her eyes, and seeing Peter, she sat up. (Acts 9:36–40)

Most New Testament scholars ignore the references to Tabitha's generosity that I have put in italics and focus their attention solely on the power of Peter, acting in *imitatio Christi*, to raise someone from the dead. This ignores an important dimension of the way in which the story has been told.

Tabitha was not just a woman of faith, but as the author of Acts emphasizes, "she was devoted to good works and acts of charity." Furthermore, when Peter comes to her dead body, the biblical author takes care to place the recipients of her charity alongside the apostle. To whom were they showing their tunics? Certainly Peter, but it is not hard to imagine that God was also being urged to take notice. That alms gifts could intercede on one's behalf was well known in contemporary Judaism and confirmed just a few verses later when in a different episode an angel tells the centurion Cornelius that both "your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God" (10:4).

As the example of King David has shown, forgiveness in the Bible is far more than just being declared innocent; it requires a process of spiritual transformation. For David this meant dealing with the consequences of what he had done wrong as they slowly surfaced over his lifetime. Punishment was nothing more than a means to the larger goal of being fashioned anew.

At the end of the biblical period the prophet Daniel shows us that this process can be accelerated through the act of almsgiving. Finally, Tabitha's example teaches us that charity allows one to amass a treasury of merit that can provide deliverance even from the bonds of death.

And so the revolution that the book of Daniel sets in motion. Whereas David has to await what the future will bring in order to complete the repair of his soul, Nebuchadnezzar can initiate that process on his own. This is the reason that almsgiving became such a prestigious act in the spirituality of Judaism and Christianity. It allowed the individual to enact the miracle of God's grace in his own life and assume the role of an active participant in the repair of the world.

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