

1. Proverbs 10:2

Treasures of wickedness provide no benefit,
but righteousness/almsgiving delivers from death.

**Treasures of wickedness provide no benefit,
but [a good treasury funded by] almsgiving delivers from death.

2. Tobit

4:7 Do not turn your face away from the poor, and the face of God will not be turned away from you. If you have many possessions, make your gift from them in proportion; if few, do not be afraid to give according to the little you have. *So you will be laying up a good treasure for yourself against the day of necessity. For almsgiving delivers from death and keeps you from going into the Darkness.*

3. Luke: Parable of the Rich Fool

12:16 Then he told them a parable: “The land of a rich man produced abundantly. 17 And he thought to himself, ‘What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?’ 18 Then he said, ‘I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. 19 And I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’ 20 But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’ 21 So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.”

4. Proverbs 19:17

He who is generous to the poor makes a loan to God, and he shall surely repay him.

5. Ben Sira 29

- 1 He who lends to his neighbor acts mercifully
and whoever gives him a hand keeps the commandments
- 2 Lend to (your) neighbor in his time of need; and repay (your) neighbor on time
- 3 Keep your word and be trustworthy with him
and on every occasion you will find what you need
- 4 There are many borrowers who seek a loan
and they cause trouble for those who help them
- 5 Until he receives it he kisses his hand
and speaks in a humble way about (his) neighbor's wealth
But at the time for repayment he delays
and repays with excuses and finds fault with the time
- 6 If he is able, he will scarcely recoup half and will regard it as a find
But if not, he (the borrower) has defrauded him of his wealth
and he (the lender) has acquired an enemy gratis
Curses and insults he will repay him
and instead of praise he will repay him with dishonor
- 7 Many turn away not on account of wickedness
(rather) they are afraid of being defrauded for no reason
8. However, with the poor person be patient
and do not keep him waiting for alms.

9. For the sake of the commandment help the poor
and according to his need do not turn him away empty-handed.
10. Lose (your) money for a kinsman or a friend
and do not place it under a stone to go to ruin,
11. Lay up your treasure according to the commandments of the Most High
and it will profit you more than gold.
12. Store up almsgiving in your treasury
and it will deliver you from every calamity.
13. More than a strong shield and a robust spear
it will fight for you against an enemy.

6. Midrash Tannaim (3rd century CE)

A certain philosopher asked a question of R. Gamliel. He said to him, "It is written in your Torah: 'Give to (your needy kinsman) readily and have no regrets when you do so.' And do you have such a man that can give away his property to others without entertaining the worry that he will eventually need help himself?!"

He replied to him, "If a man comes to borrow from you, would you give him a loan? He replied, "no!" If he brought you a deposit, would you give him a loan? He replied, "yes!"

If he brought you someone that was not quite fitting to stand as surety would you give him a loan? He replied, "no." If he brought you as surety the head of the province would you give him a loan? He replied, "yes."

Well then, is not the matter a piece of a fortiori logic: If when an ordinary mortal will go surety for him, you will issue the loan, how much the more so when he who spoke and made the world goes surety for him. For scripture says, "He who is generous to the poor makes a loan to God, [and he shall surely repay him]" (Prov 19:17).

7. St. Basil (4th century), Homily 12 on Psalm 14 (15 in Hebrew).

Listen, you rich men, to what we advise the poor because of your inhumanity; rather to persevere in their terrible situation than to accept the misfortunes which come from the payment of interest. But, if you obey the Lord, what need is there of these words? What is the counsel of the Master? "Lend to those from whom you do not hope to receive in return" (cf. Luke 6.35). "And what sort of loan is this," he says, "to which there is no hope of a return attached?" Consider the force of the statement, and you will admire the kindness of the Lawmaker. Whenever you have the intention of providing for a poor man for the Lord's sake, the same thing is both a gift and a loan because of the great gift of the Master who pays in his place, and who, receiving trifling things through a poor man, will give great things in return for them. "He that hath mercy on the poor, lendeth to God (Prov 19:17)." Do you not wish to have the Lord of the universe answerable to you for payment? Or, if one of the rich men in the city would promise you the payment for the others, would you accept his pledge? But you do not accept God as the surety for the poor. Give the money, since it is lying idle, without weighing it down with additional charges, and it will be good for both of you. There will be for you the assurance of its safety because of his custody; for him receiving it, the advantage from its use. And if you are seeking additional payment, be satisfied with that from the Lord. He Himself will pay the interest for the poor. Expect kindly acts from Him who is truly kind.

8. Leo the Great, Sermon 17

Consequently, those who love money and hope to increase their wealth with immoderate growth, let them rather practice this holy investment [sanctum fenus] and grow rich by this art of usury, that they should not lay hold of the necessities of laboring men or fall into the traps of impossible debts through deceitful benefits. Let them instead be the creditors and the money-lenders of someone who said [illius sit creditor, illius fenerator, qui dicit]: “Give and it will be given to you,” and “the measure with which you measure, the same will be measured back to you” [Lk 6.38]. But an unjust and shameless avarice which, while deceiving, says it is offering a benefit, does not believe God [non credit deo] who promises truly but at the same time believes human beings [credit homini] who bargain confusedly. While they think the present is more sure than the future, they often and deservedly run into the situation in which the desire of unjust gain is for them the cause of a not unjust loss.*

9. Peter Brown, Eye of the Needle

In some way or another, to give within the Christian churches was to open a path to heaven. With vertiginous incongruity, any Christian gift, from the smallest to the greatest, was thought to be instantly magnified out of all proportion in another world. It became "treasure in heaven." This was the conclusion that preachers drew insistently from the story of the Rich Young Man. In this story, Christ had said to the Rich Young Man: *Sell what you possess and give to the poor; and you will have treasure in heaven* (Matt. 19:21 with Mark 10:21 and Luke 18:22). He had repeated this command to his disciples: *Sell your possessions, and give to the poor; provide yourselves with. . . a treasure in the heavens which does not fail* (Luke 12:33, cf. Matt. 6:19-20). Late Roman Christians of all classes and levels of culture took these sayings of Jesus seriously. They seemed to imply a joining of heaven and earth that a non-Christian would have perceived as utterly incongruous. . . We should linger on the novelty of this attitude to the joining of heaven with earthly wealth. It is one that is in many ways strange to us. Indeed, it has caused exquisite embarrassment to modern scholars. In no modern dictionary of the Christian church does the word "treasure" appear! Yet, if we wish to understand the economic upsurge of the Christian churches at this time, it is important that we overcome a prudery no late Roman Christian would have shared.

10. Patrick Miller, Ten Commandments

Jesus' word to the young man, to *go and sell all* he has and give the money to the poor and then come and "*follow me*" joins together release from the grip of desire to have and the true object of uncontrolled, extravagant desire.

* Armitage, Two-fold Solidarity. “Leo makes a pun on the words credit (believes, trusts) and creditor, implying that the person who is God's creditor and fenerator is the one who believes and trusts in his promise. God's creditor, who practices “holy usury” is the one who credit in God and in his promises. The conventional usurer, by way of contrast, is the one who, failing to believe and trust in God, reckons praesentia, more certain than futura. We should not be afraid (metuere) of lending money to God, and should not be worried about the apparent dubium of what we are investing in. The aeterni commercium, which consists in setting one's heart on futura rather than on praesentia and in trusting that God will fulfill his promises by rewarding the merciful, recalls what Leo says elsewhere about the transitus from terrena to caelestia. Whether he is using the imagery of the ascension of the mind or that of sanctum fenus, Leo's message is much the same, namely, that if we have faith in God's promises and duly act upon that faith, we shall receive what has been promised to us.”

‘Alms’ Etymology Handout

Greek Origins: A Cluster of Related Terms

ἔλεος (éleos): mercy, compassion, pity

- Jesus quoting Hosea 6:6 (Matthew 9:13, 12:7): “I desire **mercy** (ἔλεος; éleos) and not sacrifice.”

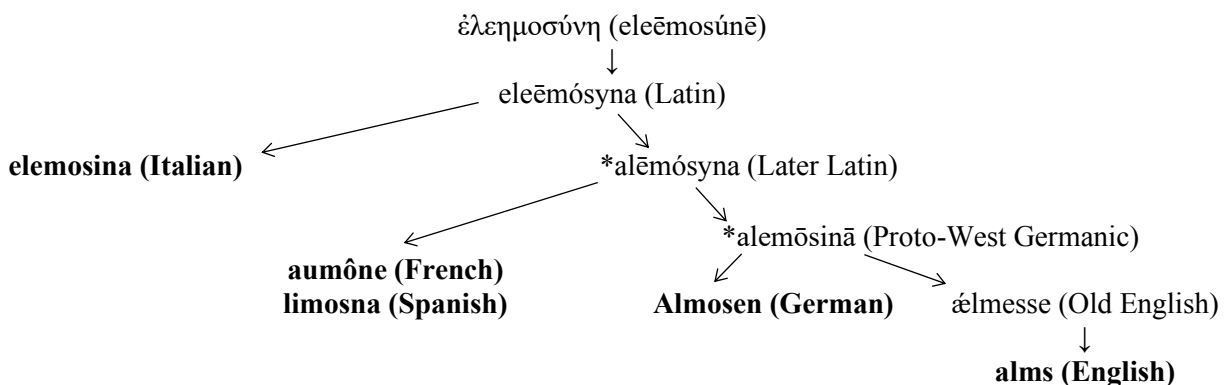
ἐλεέω (eleéō): to have mercy on someone, to show mercy, to pity, to help someone (out of pity)

- Mark 10:47-48: “And when he [Bartimaeus, the blind beggar] heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to cry out and say, “Jesus, Son of David **have mercy on me!**” And many rebuked him, telling him to be silent; but he cried out all the more, “Son of David, **have mercy on me!**”
 - “Have mercy on me!” = ἐλέησόν με (elēēson me)
- Frequent prayer in both eastern and western liturgies:
 - “Lord, **have mercy**. Christ, **have mercy**. Lord, **have mercy**”
 - Κύριε, ἐλέησον. Χριστέ, ἐλέησον. Κύριε, ἐλέησον.
 - (Kýrie elēson. Christe elēson. Kýrie elēson.)

ἐλεημοσύνη (eleēmosúnē): pity, mercy; alms, charity

- Jesus on ἐλεημοσύνη: “But when you give **alms** (ἐλεημοσύνην; eleēmosúnēn), do not let your right hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your **alms** (ἐλεημοσύνη; eleēmosúnē) may be in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you” (Matthew 6:3-4).

Descendants in Later Languages: A Visual Map



English Etymology Explained

As the above chart shows, the path from the hexasyllabic Ancient Greek word ‘ἐλεημοσύνη’ (eleēmosúnē) to the monosyllabic English word ‘alms’ is long though the latter word is a direct descendant of the former.

The Greek ‘ἐλεημοσύνη’ (eleēmosúnē) was brought into Latin by Christian Latin writers under the influence of early Greek Christianity. They simply transliterated the term, letter by letter, into Latin as ‘eleemosyna,’ changing only the final letter for grammatical reasons. In Latin, the letter ‘y’ was not used for native Latin words but only to transliterate the Greek letter ‘υ’ or *upsilon*. Thus, whenever we see a Latin word with an ‘y’, this is a dead giveaway that the word was borrowed from Greek. (The same is true of ‘th’, ‘ph’, and ‘ch’—as in the Latin words *theologia*, *philosophia*, and *character*—which stand in for the Greek letters ‘θ’-theta, ‘π’-pi, and ‘χ’-chi, respectively.)

‘Eleemosyna’ dropped a syllable in later Latin, with the awkward double ‘e’ in the middle of the word—originally two distinct sounds in Greek, ‘ε’-epsilon and ‘η’-eta—reducing to one, becoming ‘alemosyna.’ By the time we reach Old English, we find the trisyllabic ‘ælmesse.’ This became ‘almes’ in the 13th century, which further reduced to ‘alms’, our current usage, in the 17th century.

Finally, it is important to note that ‘alms’ has no relation to the word ‘alimony’ (the word for the financial support that one former spouse owes to the other following a divorce). ‘Alimony’ derives from the Latin ‘alimonia’ which means nourishment, food, sustenance, or support.

