

SEVENTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME, 2026

What do you want God to do for you? In today's first reading, a Lesson from chapter three of the First Book of Kings, God directly asks King Solomon that question. What do you want Me to do for you? King Solomon gives the best possible answer. In effect, Solomon says, "I want to be a good man," that is to say, "I want to be wise."

Biblical Wisdom is a very different thing from what "philosophy" has become. Philosophy has largely become a purely intellectual exercise (sometimes an impressive one, the intellectual equivalent of high level gymnastics), but Biblical Wisdom is about being a good human being who can be taken seriously. Part of the biblical King Solomon's wisdom was his ability to manage the affairs of his realm competently. Ancient Greek "Philosophy," or love of wisdom, had some of this dimension, but in the Bible this dimension of Wisdom is essential. Someone who has biblical Wisdom is dedicated to hearing God's word and putting it into effect in this world, intelligently and competently.

I missed the diocesan priest's retreat this June in Sedalia, south of Denver, due to a Funeral and the sheer distance between Powell, Wyoming, and Sedalia, Colorado. It is a full day getting there and a full day getting back, which didn't really make sense with a Funeral at the start of the week. Since an annual retreat is mandatory, I have to make one, and I finally made arrangements for one. Vacations are not exactly mandatory, but they come close to being required. When the Bishop asked me if I was taking one, I sensed that I couldn't really say "no", especially since I didn't take one last Summer due to the diocesan capital campaign (I just got in the mail a reminder to make the the next payment of my pledge, and I pass on that reminder to keep up with your pledges to the campaign). So I made arrangements for a vacation immediately after my retreat. Wedding, retreat, vacation. Being late in arranging these things (imagine that), all of the available retired priests of the diocese were taken by the early bird pastors, so I have brought in appeal priests.

Now, should I feel guilty about scheduling two charitable appeals in a row? Well, I certainly don't expect people to give to both, but there is something to be said for hearing both from a familiar appeal, Food for the Poor, and from an unfamiliar appeal, Unbound. Food for the Poor is quite straightforwardly about meeting food requirements in the world's poorest countries. Unbound is about sponsoring specific people in such countries find paths out of poverty, a process that involves the work of in-house evaluators to encourage, assist, and measure progress. Thus, the two appeals are not redundant, as they serve two related, but quite distinct, missions.

There are other appeals, of course, and I know that many of you get appeals in the mail and on-line. It is possible to hear too many sad stories in these appeals. One younger friend of mine in a distant parish recently told me that during one appeal, as the presenter launched into her third sad case story, he found himself hoping that one of his kids would get sick or cause trouble, and thereby allow him to take the kid out of church and escape the rest of the appeal. I trust that the priests presenting for Food for the Poor and Unbound will be more professionally competent than that poor lady, and know that mere multiplication of sad tales doesn't necessarily make an appeal more effective.

In any case, part of biblical Wisdom, the sacred art of being a good human being, is practicing good works. In today's Responsorial, from Psalm 119, we sang, "Lord teach me Your commands." One of His commands is to perform the works of mercy.

God's holy commandments are not only about avoiding sin. They are also about doing good. Each Christian is morally obliged to do good works for those in need. Obviously, Christians are not obliged to do the same good works. A billionaire in Jackson can do good works that a bar tender in Manhattan cannot (although it was a Manhattan bar tender on vacation who once remarked to me that he wished the Church would put a confessional chapel and priest next his bar, so that he could say to customers who told him their life stories, including their sins, "I can't do anything about that, but right next door there's someone who can"), but the bartender can do something. My friend who wanted to escape a particular charitable appeal and the bishop who ordered that appeal have different ways of doing good works, but they had both better do good works. As St. James warns us, "Faith without works is dead." (James 2:20)

The poor can do something for people who are even poorer, and should do so; but the rich have a stricter obligation to give alms, and sin more gravely when they do not. I dare say that a wealthy person who fails to give significantly to charity may be in a state of mortal sin. That may sound severe, but I have great St. Ambrose of Milan on my side: "The walls of your dwellings are hung with magnificent tapestries, while the poor man barely has clothes on his back. A beggar is at your door pleading for some small alms; but you, debating within yourself what kind of marble would be best for the pavement of one of your big houses, don't even notice him. But the jewels on your ring could feed a multitude!" If we replaced tapestries and jewels with private planes and exquisite antiques, we could preach the same sermon. The moral flaw is not in the tapestries, the jewels, the marble pavement, the multiple homes, the private planes, or the exquisite antiques, but in the failure to respond effectively to genuine human needs.

Effectively! Part of biblical Wisdom is competence. There are scams. There are fakes. There are those who simply refuse to work or do anything for themselves. That should not, however, be an excuse for doing nothing. It should be an admonition to do something smart. The Lord's command is to do good works for those in need, and to do so effectively.

That doesn't mean only helping organizations such as Food for the Poor and Unbound. Our family, friends, parishioners, and neighbors in need are actually a higher priority. There is truth in the old saying that charity begins at home. It begins there, but it does not stop there. For most of us, including myself, good charitable organizations are almost our only means for effectively helping the poor and suffering beyond our family, friends, parishioners, and neighbors.

Be smart and holy - and those are ultimately the same thing - and do good works, practicing the deeds of mercy. This is part of biblical Wisdom. This is part of the saving Wisdom, the pearl of great price, that the Lord Jesus speaks of in today's Gospel. The Lord Jesus has this part of saving Wisdom in mind when He says, "Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one these, the least of My brethren, you did for Me." (Matthew 25:40)