

Almsgiving is “the Commandment”:
A Note on 1 Timothy 6.6-19

Nathan Eubank

Duke University
209 Gray Building
Box 90964
Durham, NC 27708

nathaneubank@gmail.com

Abstract: This article argues that “the commandment” in 1 Timothy 6.13-14 refers to almsgiving. This shows that verses 11-16 are not an intrusion into a discussion of the proper use of wealth, but an integral part of the author’s argument in 6.6-19.

Keywords: Pastoral Epistles; almsgiving; 1 Timothy 6; the commandment; rabbinic literature; *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*

Interpreters of 1 Timothy encounter two well-known difficulties in 6.6-19. First, this section consists of two discourses on wealth (vv.6-10 and 17-19) that are separated *brutalement* by a personal address to Timothy in verses 11-16.¹ Second, the intruding address includes a solemn charge to keep “the commandment”, but there is no indication in the text which

¹ Samuel Bénétreau, “La richesse selon 1 Timothee 6, 6-10 et 6, 17-19” *ETR* 83 (2008) 50; cf. also Peter Dschulnigg, “Warnung vor Reichtum und Ermahnung der Reichen: 1 Tim 6,6-10.17-19 im Rahmen des Schlußteils 6,3-21” *BZ* 37 (1993) 60-77. Some have explained the abrupt shift in thought by positing that either vv.11-16 or 17-19 are interpolations. E.g. A. von Harnack, *Die Chronologie der altchristlichen Litteratur* (Leipzig: Hinrich, 1897) 1.482; James David Miller, *The Pastoral Epistles as Composite Documents*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) 88-95. More recently A.J. Malherbe, “Godliness, Self-Sufficiency, Greed, and the Enjoyment of Wealth: 1 Timothy 6:3-19 Part I” *NovT* 52 (2010) 376-405, esp. 400-5, argued that 6.11-16 is not an intrusion.

commandment is in view: “I command you – in the presence of God who gives life to all things and of Christ Jesus who testified the good confession before Pontius Pilate – to keep the commandment (τηρῆσαί σε τὴν ἐντολήν) without spot or blame until the appearance of our Lord Jesus Christ” (6.13-14).² The sudden and unexplained definiteness of τὴν ἐντολήν has elicited a multiplicity of interpretations, none of which has gained supremacy.³ Some commentators catalogue the many possibilities and cast a half-hearted vote for one or more.⁴ By way of contrast, Philip H. Towner avers that “the reference is surely to what Paul has charged Timothy to do in Ephesus, introduced in 1:3-5 and filled out in the course of the letter.”⁵ Yet, the wide range of opinions demonstrates that the meaning of ἡ ἐντολή is anything but “sure”.

I would like to propose a solution which I believe is not only more plausible than anything suggested thus far, but which also promises to explain both of this passage’s *cruces interpretum* in a single stroke. To anticipate my conclusion: “the commandment” refers to almsgiving – an idiom that is common in rabbinic literature and may go back to the second

² Translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

³ George W. Knight III groups previous interpretations of “the commandment” into eight categories: 1) a commandment given at Timothy’s baptism, 2) a commandment given at his ordination, 3) the whole of 6:11-12, 4) a command to persevere in his faith and ministry (cf. 4.16), 5) the content of the entire letter, 6) Timothy’s entire responsibility to the gospel and the church, 7) everything entrusted to Timothy by Paul, and 8) “the gospel viewed as a rule of life.” *The Pastoral Epistles: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Carlisle, England: Paternoster, 1992) 266. None of these solutions is impossible, but they are all rather speculative. Instead of responding directly to each of them I hope to offer the general rebuttal of an alternative solution that is more plausible.

⁴ E.g. I. Howard Marshall, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles* (ICC; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1999) 664-5; Knight, *Pastoral Epistles*, 266-68.

⁵ *The Letters to Timothy and Titus* (NICNT; Grand Rapids, MI/Cambridge, England: Eerdmans, 2006) 414.

temple period. According to this construal, verses 11-16 are not a violent intrusion into a discussion of the proper use of wealth, but an integral part of the author's argument – an argument that concludes in verses 18-19 with a call for the rich to give alms.

In 1946 Saul Lieberman noted that in rabbinic Hebrew and Aramaic מצוה (commandment) frequently means “almsgiving”.⁶ To keep the commandment, then, means to give alms, and the Aramaic phrase בר מצוותא means “man of almsgiving.” *Leviticus Rabbah* 3.1, for instance, says “Better is he who goes and works and gives charity of that which is his own, than he who goes and robs or takes by violence and gives charity of that belonging to others...It is his ambition to be called a man of almsgiving (בר מצוותא).”⁷

Lieberman pointed to a tradition in *Testament of Asher* that closely parallels the passage from *Leviticus Rabbah* and shows that the idiom “to do the commandment” appears outside of rabbinic literature: “And by the power of his wealth he destroys many, and out of his excessive wickedness, he does the commandments (καὶ ἐκ τῆς ὑπερόγκου κακίας ποιεῖ ἐντολάς)” (2:8).⁸ The problem with this literal translation of the Greek is obvious: how can one do the commandments out of excessive wickedness? Lieberman argues that “the commandments” must refer to alms here, noting that ποιεῖ ἐντολάς is the exact equivalent of the rabbinic עושה מצות.⁹ The saying would then be translated “And by the power of his wealth he destroys many, and out of his excessive wickedness [i.e. perhaps, out of the wealth gained through wickedness] he gives

⁶ “Two Lexicographical Notes,” *JBL* 65 (1946) 67-72. See also Jastrow מצוה II.

⁷ *Leviticus (The Midrash Rabbah* 4; London: Soncino, 1961) 34-5, slightly altered here.

⁸ The Greek text is from M. de Jonge, *The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs: A Critical Edition of the Greek Text* (PVTG 1.2; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1978).

⁹ i.e. the idiom occurs in the plural in Hebrew as well. “Two Lexicographical Notes,” 71.

alms.”¹⁰ The context of the saying confirms Lieberman’s insight. The passage as a whole concerns the “two-fold aspect” of those who do something good while also doing something evil, especially those who steal money and yet give alms:¹¹

Another person steals, acts unrighteously, plunders, defrauds, and [yet] gives alms (ἐλεεῖ): there are two aspects to this, but the whole is evil. He who defrauds his neighbor provokes God to anger, and swears falsely against the Most High and [yet] gives alms (ἐλεεῖ) to the poor, he nullifies and provokes the representative of the law of the Lord, and [yet] he refreshes (ἀναπαύει) the poor. (2:5-6)

Verse 8 simply continues this line of thought, speaking of those who use their money for evil ends, while also giving money to the poor. Note that the author varies the terms used to describe almsgiving: first ἐλεέω, then an alternative form of the same word, ἐλεάω, then ἀναπαύω – not a technical term for almsgiving, but the context makes its meaning clear – and finally ποιεῖν ἐντολάς.

Gary Anderson argues that the book of Tobit shows that the idea that almsgiving was *the* commandment extends back at least as far as the third or second century B.C.E.¹² When Tobit instructs his son to obey the commandments, the one example he gives is almsgiving (4.5-11). Similarly, the angel Raphael also focuses his instruction to Tobit on almsgiving (12.8-10), and the book closes with Tobit’s dying exhortation to give alms (14.8-11). Sirach is also worth considering in this regard. Sirach contains a number of statements praising almsgiving (e.g., 3.30; 35.1), and in chapter 29 the author says that those who give alms keep the commandments:

¹⁰ Lieberman (70-1) also shows that the idiom appears in later Christian Greek. E.g. Callinicus’ *Vita S. Hypatii* 9.4 where a paralytic seeks alms: ἐζήτει ἀπὸ τοῖς ἐντολήν.

¹¹ Lieberman himself notes this in passing, *Ibid.*, 71.

¹² *Sin: A History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009) 174.

“The one who gives alms loans to his neighbor and the one who helps with his hand keeps the commandments” (29.1). And again:

Nevertheless, be patient with someone in humble circumstances, and do not keep him waiting for your alms. Help the poor for the commandment's sake (χάριν ἐντολῆς ἀντιλαβοῦ πένητος), and in their need do not send them away empty-handed. Lose your silver for the sake of a brother or a friend, and do not let it rust under a stone and be lost. Lay up your treasure according to the commandments of the Most High (κατ' ἐντολὰς ὑψίστου), and it will profit you more than gold. Store up almsgiving in your treasury, and it will rescue you from every disaster; better than a stout shield and a sturdy spear, it will fight for you against the enemy (NRSV 29.8-13).

It is not as clear here as in *Testament of Asher* that the author is using “keep the commandments” as an idiom meaning “give alms.” Indeed, it is possible that the author is alluding to specific biblical injunctions to help the poor.¹³ Nevertheless, the close association between almsgiving and keeping the commandments is striking. This text, like Tobit, shows that the idea of almsgiving as the commandment par excellence existed before the first century.¹⁴

The synoptic account of the rich young man (Matt 19.16-22 and par.) is also relevant. The man asks how to inherit eternal life so Jesus tells him to obey the commandments (τὰς ἐντολάς), and names the second table of the Decalogue. The man claims to have kept these from his youth and Jesus responds: “If you desire to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven, and come follow me” (19.21).

¹³ Burkard M. Zapff suggests Deut 15.7-11. *Jesus Sirach 25-51* (EB 39; Regensburg: Echter, 2010) 180.

¹⁴ Cf. Dan 4.24; Prov 10.2; 11.4; 14.21, 31; 19.17; 28.8.

Almsgiving – albeit in its most extreme form – is presented here as the culmination or perfection of the commandments.¹⁵

The fact remains, however, that aside from the possible exception of Sirach 29 the first instance of the idiom “to do the commandment” appears in *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*, a text that is notoriously difficult to date. The terminus ad quem is Origen’s citation at the beginning of the third century.¹⁶ Howard Clark Kee suggests it was composed in the middle of the second century B.C.E.¹⁷ M. de Jonge and, more recently, Joel Marcus argue for a date around 200 C.E., very close to Origen’s citation, though both de Jonge and Marcus suppose that it contains earlier traditions.¹⁸ Origen himself appears to think the text is of some antiquity, citing it alongside of Psalms, Romans, and Sirach as evidence for the reality of more than one “satan”. To be sure, he is careful to note that *Testaments* is not canonical, but this very fact is suggestive; if Origen had thought *Testaments* was a recent concoction he presumably would not have needed to distinguish between Psalms, Romans, and Sirach on the one hand, and *Testaments*, on the other, on the basis of the latter’s lack of canonical status.

¹⁵ Cf. Matt 6.1-21. This does not stand in tension with Matt 22.34-40 and par., for almsgiving was seen as an act of worship akin to sacrifice, i.e. as a way of loving God and neighbor. E.g. Tob 4.11; Sir 35.1; *Sib. Or.* 2.78-82. See Anderson, *Sin*, 164-188. For another possible use of “the commandment” to refer to almsgiving see *Did.* 1.5.

¹⁶ *Hom. Jos.* 15.6.

¹⁷ “Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs”, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* (ed. James H. Charlesworth; Garden City: Doubleday, 1983) 1.777-8.

¹⁸ M. de Jonge, *The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs: A Study of their Text, Composition and Origin* (Van Gorcum’s Theologische Bibliotheek 25; Assen: Van Gorcum & Comp. N.V., 1953) 124; Joel Marcus, “The *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs* and the *Didascalia Apostolorum*: A Common Jewish Christian Milieu? *JTS* 61 (2010) 598.

In light of the tenuousness of any proposed date for *Testaments* it is worth mentioning that 1 Timothy itself is also difficult to date. Those, such as Luke Timothy Johnson, who think that the letter was written by Paul himself are committed to a date in the 60s at the latest.¹⁹ Most scholars, however, argue for a date in the late first century, if not later.²⁰ In such a scenario it may be prudent to turn to the evidence of 1 Timothy itself. In other words, given that this use of “commandment” is A) widespread in rabbinic literature, B) has precursors beginning in the third or second century B.C.E., and C) is found in a tradition (*T. Ash. 2*) that may predate 1 Timothy, but that also may postdate it by over a hundred years, it is certainly possible, though far from certain, that the author of 1 Timothy would have known this idiom. The only way to decide is to turn to the text itself.

As noted above, 1 Timothy 6.6-19 is commonly divided into two discourses on wealth (vv.6-10 and 17-19), with a personal address to Timothy crammed in-between in verses 11-16. I would suggest, on the contrary, that verses 11-16 continue the admonition of 6-10 and lead naturally into the advice for those who are already rich in 17-19. After warning Timothy that the pursuit of money leads to destruction (vv.9-10) the author addresses him directly (note: τηρῆσαι τὴν ἐντολὴν is translated “give alms” for the sake of argument):

But as for you, man of God, shun all this; pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness. Fight the good fight of the faith; take hold of the eternal life, to which you were called and for which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses. I command you – in the presence of God who gives life to all things and

¹⁹ *The First and Second Letters to Timothy* (AB 35a; New York: Doubleday, 2001) 55-99.

²⁰ E.g. Raymond F. Collins, *1 & 2 Timothy and Titus: A Commentary* (NTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002) 9; Benjamin Fiore, *The Pastoral Epistles: First Timothy, Second Timothy, Titus* (SP 12; Collegeville, MI: Liturgical Press, 1991) 19-20.

of Christ Jesus who testified the good confession before Pontius Pilate – to *give alms* (τηρῆσαι σε τὴν ἐντολήν) without spot or blame until the appearance of our Lord Jesus Christ, which he will bring about at the right time. (6.11-15a NRSV alt.)

The shift in verse 11 is anything but abrupt; those who pursue money find destruction, but Timothy is to pursue righteousness et cetera, to fight the good fight and take hold of eternal life. Then the author gives a more specific alternative to the pursuit of money, solemnly commanding Timothy to give alms until the return of the Lord, perhaps implying that at that time he will be rewarded.²¹

After the command to give alms the author tarries a bit in the doxological description of the one who is to return (6.15-16), but then returns to the subject at hand:

As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life. (6.17-19 NRSV)

Commentators frequently fail to recognize that these verses are an almost point-by-point restatement of the admonitions of 11-16, altered slightly to apply to those who already have money. Timothy is to A) flee from the love of money, B) pursue instead righteousness, godliness etc., and C) take hold of eternal life (ἐπιλαβοῦ τῆς αἰωνίου ζωῆς) and *keep the commandment* until Christ appears. Similarly, the rich are A) not to be proud because of their money nor put their hope in it; B) rather, they should put their hope in God, and C) give their money away in order to take hold of true life (ἐπιλάβωνται τῆς ὀντως ζωῆς). If “the commandment” here refers

²¹ Cf. 2 Tim 4:6-8.

to almsgiving then the author would simply be telling Timothy the same thing that Timothy is to tell the rich: instead of pursuing money, pursue eternal life and give alms.²²

There is strong contextual reason to suppose, therefore, that the author is using the idiom found in *Testament of Asher* and in rabbinic literature: “the commandment” means almsgiving. Verses 11-16 are not an abrupt intrusion into a discussion of the proper use of wealth, but an integral part of the argument. Verses 6-10 describe how the pursuit of money can lead to spiritual ruin. In verses 11-16 the author gives Timothy the antidote to such ruin, telling him to pursue eternal life and give alms. Verses 17-18 repeat this advice, adapting it to apply to the rich; rather than hoping in their wealth they should give alms in order to attain true life. The idiom of almsgiving as “the commandment” not only explains why the author simply speaks of “the commandment” with no further clarification; it also fits hand in glove with 6.6-19 as a whole.²³

²² This may seem “ganz unpaulinisch”, as H. Merkel put it, *Die Pastoralbriefe* (NTD 9/1; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1991) 52. Nevertheless, this is the epistle that says women will be saved through childbearing (2.15).

²³ The argument presented here may serve as a corrective to the tendency to read the Pastoral Epistles, as well as other early Christian texts, as emerging from *either* a Jewish *or* a Greco-Roman milieu. In a recent magisterial article on wealth in 1 Tim 6, Abraham Malherbe sets out “to explore more extensively than has been done the traditions used in [1 Tim 6.17-19]” (“Godliness, Self-sufficiency, Greed, and the Enjoyment of Wealth” 377; see also part II: *NovT* 53 [2011] 73-96). This article bristles with insights into 1 Tim’s indebtedness to popular philosophy. Nevertheless, one may object that in a fifty-two page investigation of the traditions used in 1 Tim 6 some mention should be made of Jewish traditions with equal if not greater explanatory power. Of course, one can hardly fault Malherbe for not reading “the commandment” in the way suggested here – though it may not be unfair to say that this explanation has remained elusive because of an assumption on the part of some that Jewish sources are of little relevance to 1 Tim. Nevertheless, there are other, more obvious examples. For instance, 1 Tim 6.17-19 and Tob 4.7-10, both exhortations to almsgiving, contain remarkably similar language. Those with money are to “treasure up” (ἀποθησαυρίζω) for themselves (ἐαυτοῖς / σεαυτῷ) a good foundation or treasure (θεμέλιον καλὸν/

θέμα ἀγαθὸν) for the future (εἰς τὸ μέλλον/εἰς ἡμέραν ἀνάγκης). 1 Tim says that this treasuring up will allow the wealthy to “take hold of true life.” Similarly, Tob explains that almsgiving delivers from death. Never in his lengthy investigation of the traditions used in 1 Tim 6.17-19 does Malherbe mention this passage. Regardless of whether the author of 1 Timothy is consciously alluding to Tobit, this passage and others like it illuminate the logic of 1 Tim 6, a text which counsels giving away earthly treasure in order to obtain heavenly treasure and eternal life (E.g. Prov 10:2; 11:4; Dan 4:24; *Sib. Or.* 2.78-82.).

I would like to thank T. J. Lang and John Kincaid for their helpful comments on an earlier version of this essay.