

OLD ENGLISH *ÆLMES*/*ÆLMYSSE* AS ‘MERITORIOUS DEED’

Old English religious texts frequently advocate almsgiving – *ælmesse*/*ælmysse*, or *ælmesdæd*/*ælmysdæd* – as a means of atoning for sin: almsgiving was said to extinguish sin just as water extinguishes fire.¹ The primary meanings of *ælmesse* and *ælmesdæd* are the physical act of donation, ‘alms’, ‘almsgiving’, or ‘act of charity’,² but these words were also ultimately used to describe meritorious acts benefitting the person who performed them, whether or not they involved the donation of money or wealth.

This extended meaning has been noted in Middle English for the words *almes* and *almesded*: the Middle English Dictionary’s third definition for *almes* is ‘satisfaction made for sin, or “merit” earned, by works of charity; meritorious action in general, a good deed’; its third definition for *almesdede* is ‘a meritorious act, a good deed’.³ Middle English examples, such as ‘forthi me think almous it isse, To wirke sum god thing on Inglisse,⁴ and ‘hit ys a gret almes-dede to bere weteness of trewth’,⁵ clearly do not intend a material donation but rather a good deed more generally.

Although this meaning is not currently recorded in the Dictionary of Old English for either *ælmesse* or *ælmesdæd*, Old English writers from at least the tenth century certainly used *ælmesse* this way. The extension of the meaning of *ælmesse* to include other kinds of meritorious acts seems to have occurred first in Latin and then to have made its way into Old English via Latin sources. Alcuin’s *De virtutibus et vitiis*, written c. 800 for Margrave Wido, outlines three kinds of almsgiving (*elemosina*): these are material (giving to the needy), spiritual (showing forgiveness to others) and correcting people to bring them to the truth.⁶

This part of Alcuin’s text was used almost verbatim in an anonymous ninth-century Latin penitential homily which was the source of Vercelli Homily III, normally assumed to have been written some time in the tenth century.⁷ The Old English is closely translated from the Latin and presents *ælmesse* as referring not only to material donations but also to forgiveness and to the correction of those who need it:

¹ See e.g. Homily 10 (*In Letania Maiore*), ll. 70-2, ed. J. Bazire and J.E. Cross, *Eleven Old English Rogationtide Homilies* (Toronto, 1982): ‘Swa se mann se ðe his ælnessan singallice for Gode syleð, þonne adwæscēð he his synna swa mon mid wætere adwæscēð byrnende fyr’; ‘So the man who gives alms continually for God, then he will quench his sins just as a man quenches a burning fire with water’.

² ‘ælmesse, ælmes’, ‘ælmes-dæd, ælmesse-dæd’, *Dictionary of Old English*, ed. Angus Cameron et al., University of Toronto Press, <https://dictionary.doe.utoronto.ca/doe/>, accessed 19/01/2026.

³ ‘almes(se’, ‘almes-dēde’, *Middle English Dictionary*, ed. Robert E. Lewis, et al. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1952-2001), Online edition in Middle English Compendium ed. Frances McSparran, et al. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000-2018), <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary>, accessed 19/01/2026.

⁴ *English Metrical Homilies*, ed. J. Small (1862), 4.

⁵ British Library, Additional Charter 22 265, ed. L. Morsbach, *Mittelenglische Originalurkunden von der Chaucer-Zeit bis zur Mitte des XV. Jahrhunderts, Alt- und mittelenglische Texte* 10 (1923), 11.

⁶ XVII, PL101.626B: ‘Tria sunt genera eleemosynarum: una corporalis, egenti dare quiddid potueris; altera spiritalis, dimittere ei a quo laesus fueris; tertia delinquentem corrigere, et errantes in viam reducere veritatis.’ See P. Szarmach, ‘A Preliminary Handlist of Manuscripts containing Alcuin’s *Liber de virtutibus et vitiis*’, *Manuscripta* 25:3 (1981), 131-40, at 131-2.

⁷ J. Turville-Petre, ‘Translations of a Lost Penitential Homily’, *Traditio* 19 (1963), 51-78; H.L. Spencer, ‘Vernacular and Latin Versions of a Sermon for Lent: “a Lost Penitential Homily” Found’, *Medieval Studies* 44 (1982), 271-305, see 290, ll. 126-8 for the relevant text. The Latin homily is preserved in the important ninth-century homiliary Cambridge, Pembroke College Library 25, at ff. 42v-46r: J.E. Cross, *Cambridge Pembroke College MS. 25: a Carolingian sermonary used by Anglo-Saxon preachers* (London: Kings College, 1987).

Witodlice, þreo cyn synt ælmesse: an is lichamlic, þæt is þæt man þam wædliendan sylle to gode þæt he mæge; oðer is gastlic, þæt is þæt man forgife þam þe wið hine gegylteð; þridde: þæt man þam gyltendan gestyre & ða dwoliendan an rihtan gebringe.⁸

Forgiveness as a kind of *ælmesse* appears also in one of Ælfric of Eynsham's 'Catholic Homilies', included in the second series which was completed in the early 990s:⁹

Þas twa ælmessana cynn us sind to beganne. mid micelre gecnyrdnysse. þæt we oðrum mannum mid inweardre heortan forgifon. gif hi awar us geæbiligdon. to ði þæt god us forgyfensse do ure synna; And uton don þearfum. and wannspedigum sume hiððe ure goda. þam ælmihtigum gode to wurðmynte. þe hit us alænde. þæt he us mare on ðam toweardan forgife;¹⁰

Perhaps based on one of Augustine's sermons, Ælfric distinguishes between the gift of material wealth to the needy so that God will give to the giver, and forgiveness of other people so that God will forgive the forgiver, a juxtaposition which is particularly resonant in Old English since *forgyfan* can mean both 'give' and 'forgive'.¹¹

A more extended discussion of the 'many' kinds of *ælmesse* appears in a composite Old English homily preserved uniquely in Cambridge, University Library Ii.1.33.¹² The author refers to the conventional form of almsgiving as a charitable donation before discussing other types of *ælmesse*, including baptism, teaching, and praying and offering masses for other Christians, which are understood to produce a spiritual benefit to the person who performs them, as the 'good deeds' by which God leads a man to heaven:

We habbað on þysum cwyde oftæwe gehrewod embe halige ælmyssan þe man Godes þances ægþer ge to cyrican ge earmum mannum for godes lufan don sceal. Nu syndo fela cynna ælmyssan. Þeah men ealle to cyrican don ne magon æt anum sæle on ælcere stowe, man mæg godes willan þurh ælmissan wyrcan & þurh oþre goode dæda. Mycel ælmesse byð þæt man man fullige & to fulluhte nime and swa þonne hæþenan deoflum ætbrede, and mycel ælmysse byð þæt man geongum men wisdom lære and hine for his dysige gelome beswinge oþ þæt he wis by, and [mycel] ælmysse byð eac þæt man [bidde] mid mæssan & mid oðrum halgum gebedum for eall cristenfolc ægþer ge for þa þe synd forðfarene of þisum life ge for þa þe on life synde, forþan nis

⁸ Vercelli III, ll. 154-9, ed. D.G. Scragg, *The Vercelli Homilies and Related Texts*, EETS OS 300 (London 1992). 'Truly, there are three kinds of almsgiving: one is physical, that is that a man give to the weak for God what he can; the second is spiritual, that is that a man forgive those who sin against him; the third is that a man correct the offender and then bring the foolish into righteousness.'

⁹ Joyce D. Hill, 'Ælfric: his life and works', in *A Companion to Ælfric*, ed. H. Magennis and M. Swan, 35-65, at 56.

¹⁰ CH II.7, ll. 40-3, ed. M. Godden, *Catholic Homilies, Second Series*, EETS SS 5 (Oxford, 1979): 'There are two kinds of almsgiving for us to observe with great diligence, that we forgive other men with our inner hearts, if they have offended us, so that God will give us forgiveness for our sins; and let us render to the needy and to the poor some part of our goods to almighty God for honour, which he lent to us, so that he might give us more in the future'. M. Godden, 'Ælfric: Catholic Homilies 2.7' (1997), *Fontes Anglo-Saxonici: World Wide Web Register*, <https://arts.st-andrews.ac.uk/fontes/>, accessed 19/01/2026

¹¹ 'for-gyfan', *Dictionary of Old English*, ed. Angus Cameron et al. (Toronto), <https://dictionary.doe.utoronto.ca/doe/>, accessed 19/01/2026.

¹² Homily IX, ed. A.M.L. Fadda, *Nuove omelie anglosassoni della rinascenza benedettina* (Florence, 1977). See also O.M. Traxel, *Language change, writing and textual interference in post-conquest English manuscripts: the evidence of Cambridge, University Library Ii.1.33* (Frankfurt-am-Main, 2004), 31.

nan ælmyssan on þisum life þes þe us bec secgað swa mære ne swa good swa is þeo halige mæsse, gif man aþer singð oððe for cwicne man oððe for deadne. And þæt is mycel ælmesse þæt man cyrican arære [...] We ne magon nu þe ealle ælmessan anemnige. Ac ic eow nu bidde þæt ge þis spel georne smeagan and Godes willan gewyrcean swa oftesst magon þæt he eow þurh gode dæda to heofenan gelæde.¹³

The manuscript containing this homily was produced in the second half of the twelfth century and is one of the latest collections of Old English, but many of the texts it includes were composed substantially earlier: the opening line of this homily derives from Vercelli XIX and the concluding part relates to penitential texts preserved in early eleventh-century manuscripts.¹⁴

The theory of almsgiving was that someone who gave generously to poor people or to the 'poor in spirit' (i.e. the Church) would in return be given much by God, so that while the recipient of the donor's generosity receives a material benefit, the act of giving also confers a spiritual benefit upon the donor.¹⁵ In the Latin and Old English texts which describe good works as 'almsgiving' (*ælmesse* / *elemosina*), however, the actions mentioned confer a spiritual benefit upon the person who performs them whether or not they relate primarily to the donation of material wealth. Instead, what may have been important is the perception of generosity in relation to these actions, whether or not actual giving was involved.

It seems that even relatively small acts of generosity that did not relate to material donation could, in some contexts, be described as almsgiving. A passage included in two composite anonymous homilies produced probably in the eleventh century discusses the merits of almsgiving in general before giving the example of an act of kindness towards the needy as an example of *micel ælmesse*:

ðeah se man nime ænne stan and lece on ful sloh, þæt se ælmesman mæge mid þam oðrum fet steppan on ða clænan healfe, þæt him bið micel ælmesse and micel med for gode.¹⁶

Interestingly, no surviving texts appear to offer a clear discussion of *ælmesdæd* as a synonym for a meritorious act, although Middle English *almesdede* does have this extended meaning.

¹³ IX, ll. 77-92, 106-9, ed. Fadda: 'We have in this discourse thoroughly discussed the holy almsgiving which man shall do to thank God either to the church or to needy men for the love of God. Now there are many kinds of almsgiving. Although men cannot give everything to the church at one time and everywhere, man can work God's will through almsgiving and through other good deeds. It is great 'almsgiving' that a man baptizes another and takes baptism, and so releases the heathen man from devils, and it is great 'almsgiving' that someone teaches wisdom to young men and frequently chastises him for his foolishness until he is wise. And it is also [great] 'almsgiving' that someone with masses and with other holy prayers [prays] for all Christian people, either for those who are departed from this life or for those who are in life. Therefore there is no almsgiving in this life, as books teach us, which is as great nor as good as is the holy mass, if someone sings them either for living men, or for the departed. And that is great 'almsgiving', that someone builds a church [...] We cannot now enumerate all 'almsgiving'. But I now ask you that you think about this discussion earnestly and do God's will as often as you can so that he will lead you to heaven through good deeds.'

¹⁴ D.G. Scragg, 'The Corpus of Vernacular Homilies and Prose Saints' Lives before Ælfric', *Anglo-Saxon England* 8 (1979), 257.

¹⁵ E.g. Ps. 40:2; D.J. Downs, 'Redemptive Almsgiving and Economic Stratification in 2 Clement', *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, 19:4, 493-517.

¹⁶ Homily XLVII, ed. A.S. Napier, *Wulfstan. Sammlung der ihm zugeschriebenen homilien nebst Untersuchungen über ihre Echtheit* (Berlin, 1883), 239.9-12; a nearly identical passage occurs in Homily LVIII, 303.8-12. 'Even if a man takes a stone and places it on a completely muddy spot, so that a beggar may step with his other foot onto the clean part, that will be a very great 'almsgiving' for him and a reward before God.'

It is possible, although not certain, that Old English *ælmesdæd* might have also been understood this way where it is presented without verbs of giving. For instance, a passage from another of Ælfric's 'Catholic Homilies' lists *ælmesdæda* among a list of things which God commanded:

We sceolon eac cristes acennednysse. and his gebyrtdide mid gastlicere blisse wurðian. and us sylfe mid godum weorcum geglengan. and us mid godes lofsangum gebysgian. and ða ðing onscunian. ðe crist forbytt. þæt sind leahtras. and deofles weorc. and ða ðing lufian ðe god bebed. þæt is eadmodnys. and mildheortnys. rihtwisnys. and soðfæstnys. ælmesdæda. and gemetfæstnys. gepylde and clænnys;¹⁷

While this could certainly mean almsgiving in the conventional sense of a charitable donation, the broader meaning of 'good works' would not be out of place. In the absence of clear textual evidence confirming the more extended meaning, however, this must remain uncertain.

Although there are comparatively few clear-cut examples of the extended meaning of *ælmesse* from the extant Old English corpus, there are numerous instances which are ambiguous and from which the reader or listener could have understood either the narrower or broader meaning (or both). For example, a passage from another of Ælfric's homilies notes that someone who cannot maintain abstinence can clean himself *mid ælmyssan and mid sumere dædbote* ('with almsgiving and with some kind of penance').¹⁸ Whether Ælfric intended the more restricted or the broader meaning of *ælmisse* here is unclear, but either meaning could be appropriate in this context.

Recognising that *ælmesse* could be used with this extended meaning at least from the tenth century is significant, both because it demonstrates that the Old English word acquired this additional sense much earlier than has previously been realised, and also because it enriches our understanding of texts which use *ælmesse* without a verb of giving and without specifying what exactly was meant, leaving open the possibility of multiple interpretations for contemporary audiences.

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¹⁷ CH II.1, ed. Godden, 277-282: 'We should honour Christ's incarnation and birth with spiritual joy, and adorn ourselves with good works, and busy ourselves with songs praising God, and shun the things which Christ forbade, that is sins and the devil's work, and love the things that God commanded, that is humility and mercy, righteousness and truthfulness, almsdeeds and moderation, patience and chastity.'

¹⁸ Homily 20, ll. 116-18, ed. J.C. Pope, *Homilies of Ælfric: A Supplementary Collection* (London).