

## The Life of Religion: Charity

A sermon by the Rev. Michael Gladish  
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“Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did [anything] to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me. [And] inasmuch as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me.” - Matthew 25:40 & 45

In case it hasn't been clear, our theme for the summer is the life of religion. The first sermon in the series discussed how important this is. The second, last week, referenced the appropriate application of our thought process to this life – stretching the bow of doctrine to let our arrows of truth fly in the right direction. Now we are talking about good works specifically.

So, everybody knows that the life of religion is the life of love to the Lord and charity toward the neighbor. Even the people who believe in salvation by grace through faith, and faith alone, know that true faith manifests itself in the life of love and charity. The problem is not that we don't understand this; it's that we find it difficult. And so we are inclined to ask, as a certain lawyer asked Jesus in the Gospel of Luke, “But... who IS my neighbor?” at which point the Lord told His parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:29-37).

Now it's pretty important that we see how plain and simple these teachings are. In our lesson from Matthew we are given a list of 6 specific needs we often find in people around us – hunger, thirst, sickness, imprisonment and so on, and we're told that if we don't attend to these needs we can't “inherit the kingdom” of heaven. Likewise in Luke, if we don't show mercy to the needy we can't “inherit eternal life.” There are dozens – perhaps hundreds – of other passages, especially in the Prophets, the Gospels and the book of Revelation, that stress the same thing, often referring to widows, orphans, the lame, halt, maimed and other human problems. In fact the Lord specifically commissioned His disciples to “heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead and cast out demons” (Matt. 10:8).

But even if we accept that the neighbor is either a needy person or one who ministers to that needy person, we still have the challenge of what exactly we should DO and how we should do it to be truly helpful, truly charitable. For example, in Bible times there was no social safety net for the needy: no health insurance, no Medicare, no social security, and of course the medical profession was primitive at best. It really was up to family members themselves to provide for their own as best they could. Today – we may not fully appreciate these social programs but they do go a long way toward providing for the needy and they have the advantage of consolidating resources and administering them in ways that individuals could not do on their own. Still, we are obliged to be merciful as an expression of our *personal* faith. How can we best do that?

One of our ministers gave a lovely presentation about this at our recent clergy meetings. In explaining the spiritual meaning of the 6 classes of the neighbor mentioned in Matthew 25 he invited us all to reflect on how each of us fits these descriptions, and what we might WANT from supportive, merciful people as a response, showing in this way how we might help others. For example, spiritual hunger is a longing for good, which is often expressed in forms of usefulness. How can we encourage one another in our efforts to feel *and be* truly useful?

Spiritual sickness is an acknowledgement of evils in our lives: what's gone wrong? What's not

working? What resentments or other painful feelings are we carrying around? And how can we support one another in removing those evils? Sometimes it's not actual intervention that's needed but simple kindness or some positive role modelling. In any case we'll never really know what people need unless we ask them.

Spiritual imprisonment is an acknowledgment of the falsities in our lives – falsities that really restrict our freedom because we don't really understand what's going on. True to the lesson, only the Lord can actually free people from spiritual slavery, but we can *visit* them and compassionately help them get a better perspective and come to a better understanding.

The other three categories were treated similarly, as explained in the *Arcana* at the beginning of volume 7 (ref. appended at the end of this sermon). But there are much larger issues here. With all the emphasis in the doctrines on literal, natural works of charity being “the external of the church” it really is important for us to consider (a) what responsibilities we have to give *literally* to the poor, and (b) what responsibilities, if any, the church as a whole may have to do the same.

On the first point the answer is pretty clear. We read,

“By benefactions ... are meant those helpful services which are rendered outside the ordinary duties of one's occupation. They are called benefactions, because in doing them a person is left to *his own freedom and good pleasure*; and when they are done, they are regarded by the recipient as benefits conferred upon him in accordance with reasons and intentions which *the benefactor himself* has deemed sufficient and proper. It is a prevailing idea that charity consists solely in giving to the poor, relieving the needy, providing for widows and orphans, contributing towards the building of hospitals, infirmaries, homes for strangers and orphans, and especially towards churches, and also towards their adornment and endowment. *Many of these things, however, are not the proper works of charity, and bear no relation to it*” (TCR #425).

The passage goes on to describe how some people engage in such external acts of charity from a truly charitable heart, while others do so from a love of their own reputation, honor and gain, in which case they are not really acts of charity.

“Nevertheless,” we read, “it is true that such benefactions, particularly the giving of alms to poor persons and beggars, are advantageous in many ways; for by them children and servants, and in general all persons of a simple nature, are initiated into charity. *These acts are its externals, by which they are introduced into the duties of charity*; they are its rudiments, which are at first like unripe fruit. But with those who are later made perfect by right conceptions of charity and faith, they become like ripe fruit. They now regard the works which formerly were done in simplicity of heart, as an obligation” (TCR #426).

So, for example, even though it might not be the wisest choice to give money to a beggar, especially when you know nothing about him, still, if only for the sake of the children who are with you, who feel compassion for the poor fellow, it may be important to give him *something* as a tangible gesture of mercy. Then, too, if we feel that same compassion we might give something out of our own affection that can't be abused – like food or a gift certificate. But the decision to

do so is a benefaction and NOT a duty because, well, who really knows whether this is good for the person himself (psychologically or spiritually), good for the community, or good for the city? We make the best judgment we can, but we are not *obliged* to help the needy in this way because we don't really know the person, and the long term benefits are so unclear. Again we read,

“It is believed by many, that love towards the neighbor consists in giving to the poor, in assisting the indigent, and in doing good to everyone; *but charity consists in acting prudently, and to the end that good may result.* He who assists a poor or indigent evil doer does evil to the neighbor through him, for through the assistance which he renders, he confirms him in evil, and supplies him with the means of doing evil to others. It is otherwise with him who gives support to the good” (NJHD #100).

On the other hand, when we do prudent research and find charitable organizations whose members really understand people's needs and how to serve them well, then we can have confidence in making donations (whether of time, skill or money) to those organizations, **and we should do so** according to our best judgment and conscience, in line with our own sense of priorities and our own particular understanding of the needs.

In contrast to all this, the *duties* or *obligations* of charity are much more compelling. Simply put, the teaching is that *every* responsibility we have is an act of charity when it is done sincerely, justly and faithfully while shunning evils as sins against the Lord (D Charity #158ff). In fact, we read, the proper fulfillment of these obligations is actually a form of worship – not the only form of worship we need, but a very important one. So when we act with integrity and *do good work* in our daily life, our jobs, our professions, and even our use of human or material resources; when we maintain a positive attitude, avoid any kind of cheating and try to be helpful to others we are not only *being* charitable, we are becoming *forms of charity itself*. If everybody did this all the time we would be living in heaven on earth.

But thinking again about benefactions, what about the church itself *as an institution* becoming a form of charity? The teachings about this are in some ways not as clear as they are for the individual. Of course, we know that the church as an organization is just a composite of the church in its individual members, so there's a certain logic to saying that it should be doing the same things the individual members do but on a larger scale. And this may very well be true when there is agreement among the members about **WHAT** to do. So, for example, some church congregations – like ours – devote themselves primarily to the education of children. Others focus on helping the homeless or hungry or on providing space for other community groups. The risk, of course, is that in the end people who don't identify with these particular uses may not identify with the church that sponsors them and so lose interest. Sadly, we know that this has been the case over the years for some members of this very church.

On the other hand, knowing the importance of natural acts or works of charity we can reasonably infer that the organization ought to be doing *something* that looks beyond itself to the service of others. The big question is *what?*

“Young people and servants,” that is, in our culture, those whose education is limited, evidently need firm grounding in the simple acts of charity that involve helping people naturally. By these activities they are introduced to more interior states of charity. But in any case, all of us need to

put our time and money into what we believe, and not just try to *think* our way into heaven. So the church can and should provide a framework from which and within which its members can express their love for others. The difficulty is in making this work for everybody, and not just for those who favor one use or another. So again, how can we do this?

Well, just as with the individual, the church should attend to its obligations first of all, and these can be defined in various ways, but they will all look to the uses of worship and education so that we have the tools and the support we need to learn and practice a heavenly life. Among other things this means attending church functions – not just for ourselves but for the support of others, and also contributing both time and money to keep the church healthy. Just like an individual, if the church itself is needy it will be in no position to help others.

Once the obligations have been addressed, however, benefactions can and should be considered. Just as the human body has various organs and parts all functioning together, so the church can have various organs and parts commensurate with its size and diversity, each focused on some distinct form of charity. Some, like the church school, will cost a tremendous amount of money, but then, the use of raising children in the sphere of the New Church can't really be measured in dollars. Others may cost little or nothing beyond time, commitment and organization. Still, it will be necessary to identify common interests, common perceptions of the needs, and appropriate leadership, not to mention solutions to the scheduling challenge. The important thing is that people feel free to participate in these benefactions *or not* according to their common understanding and convictions, and that they feel affirmed in what they do even if it isn't what other people want to do.

The life of charity is organic. It grows and flourishes like any other living thing – under the right conditions in a favorable environment, with proper heat and light (that is, love and wisdom), and with a specific niche or use to fill. Some will want to do the works of charity on a spiritual level, showing love and affection to the spiritually hungry, sharing knowledge and insight with the spiritually thirsty, encouraging the spiritually sick, and helping spiritual prisoners get perspective and understanding. But others will want to work at food banks or soup kitchens, welcome refugees from war torn countries, provide clean drinking water for those in the third world, volunteer at clinics or nursing homes, and, yes, visit people in prison. In any of these uses the ministers may or may not participate, but without a doubt we will support any legitimate charitable work church members want to do.

The point is that the very heart of the church is to care about others and to promote the good in them – even to lay down our own lives for their sake. The doctrines of the church have no other purpose than to support this work. And it can be done in many ways, on many levels. So... what is YOUR favorite charity, and why? Is there some charitable work YOU'D like to do with a small or large group of church members? Don't be shy. Talk it up and see who might like to join you. The world surely will be a better place because of it.

Amen.

Lessons:     *Matthew 25:31-e*  
                  Children's talk on Doing Good  
                  *Psalm 15*  
                  *Doctrine of Life #1 & Heaven & Hell #475*

A Prayer for this Service

Heavenly Father, help us all to be truly useful to one another, to ask the right questions, to listen well, and to respond to one another in ways that truly serve all of our spiritual lives. Give us understanding, we pray, that we may know *how* to be helpful to our neighbors, including how to promote the good, the true and the useful things You have given them all to do. So bless us, we pray, as we do our best to bless *them* according to Your Word. – Amen.

Supplemental reading from the *Arcana Caelestia* #4955-56

“The doctrinal (principles) existing among the ancients taught all the genera and all the species of charity, and also who the neighbor is toward whom charity is to be exercised, and how one is the neighbor in a different degree and in a different respect from another, and consequently how the exercise of charity varies in its application toward different persons. They also grouped the neighbor together into classes, and assigned them names, calling some the poor, needy, miserable, afflicted; some the blind, lame, halt, and also fatherless and widows; and others the hungry, thirsty, strangers, naked, sick, bound, and so on; thus knowing what duty they owed toward one and toward another. But as before said these doctrinals perished, and with them the understanding of the Word, insomuch that no one at this day knows otherwise than that by the poor, the widows, and the fatherless, in the Word, none other are meant than they who are so called; in like manner here by the hungry, the thirsty, the strangers, the naked, the sick, and those who are in prison; when yet by these charity is described such as it is in its essence, and the exercise of it such as it must be in its life.

“The essence of charity toward the neighbor is the affection of good and truth, and the acknowledgment of self as being evil and false; yea, the neighbor is good and truth itself, and to be affected by these is to have charity. The opposite to the neighbor is evil and falsity, which are held in aversion by one who has charity. He therefore who has charity toward the neighbor is affected by good and truth, because they are from the Lord, and holds in aversion what is evil and what is false because these are from self; and when he does this, he is in humiliation from self-acknowledgment, and when he is in humiliation, he is in a state of reception of good and truth from the Lord. These are the characteristics of charity which in the internal sense are involved in these words of the Lord: ‘I was hungry, and ye gave Me to eat; I was thirsty, and ye gave Me drink; I was a stranger, and ye gathered Me; naked, and ye clothed Me; I was sick, and ye visited Me; I was in prison, and ye came unto Me.’ That these words involve such things, no one can know except from the internal sense. The ancients, who had the doctrinals of charity, knew these things; but at this day they appear so remote that everyone will wonder at its being said that these things are within. Moreover, the angels who are with people perceive these words no otherwise, for by the hungry they perceive those who from affection desire good; by the thirsty, those who from affection desire truth; by a stranger, those who are willing to be instructed; by the naked, those who acknowledge that there is nothing of good and of truth in themselves; by the sick, those who acknowledge that in themselves there is nothing but evil; and by the bound, or those who are in prison, those who acknowledge that in themselves there is nothing but falsity. If these things are reduced into one meaning, they signify what has been stated just above.”