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Matters of Christian Charity

“Everyone was screaming at me as I lay in the middle of that circle, shaking their fingers and spitting in my face. Sure, I was caught in the act; but they tricked me. By our laws, I was to be stoned, but what about my lover? Why aren’t they stoning him too? Then this Teacher of the law told them, ‘He who is without sin among you, let him be the first to throw a stone at her’ (John 8:7). It didn’t take long until He and I were the only ones in the court. He looked over at me and asked if no one condemned me and I told Him no. Then He commanded me to do something I’m still trying to do today, to go and sin no more. No one ever treated me with such charity, literally saved my life and taught me a better way to live, like Him.”

At another time, as Jesus was speaking of the judgment and requirements of the kingdom of heaven, these are the words He used to teach His disciples about Christian charity: “For I was hungry, and you gave Me something to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me something to drink; I was a stranger, and you invited Me in; naked, and you clothed Me; I was sick, and you visited Me; I was in prison, and you came to Me” (Matt 25:35-36). Jesus then discussed the response of the King to the righteous who asked when Jesus was ever in these situations: “Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me” (25:40).

Most people would probably cite Scripture about giving generously to missions or even to some church benevolence fund, or some of Paul’s writings on giving principles. But financial giving is only a small part of Christian charity. Such distinctions or classifications would make Christians no godlier than the Pharisees God’s own Son railed against in the gospels. When one thinks of charity, one is brought to a word that introduces a much larger topic of how the Christian reacts to his or her very world around them. Charity expands beyond finances into the attitude and heart, ability and need, and lifestyle of the Christian.

When John Winthrop broaches the subject of Christian charity, he opens with his thesis: “God Almighty in His most holy and wise providence, hath so disposed of the condition of mankind, as in all times some must be rich, some poor, some high and eminent in power and dignity; others mean and in subjection” (95). Because this is his thesis, Winthrop spends much time debating what the responsibilities of the rich and the poor are, which are financial criteria, and also those responsibilities of those with power and under authority, which are social criteria. My distinction is not set to those criteria, for I would argue that the Christian must be charitable no matter what his situation in life.

If one were to first look at the attitude of the Christian and the attitude of the one receiving charity, a deeper matter is at hand. It is not just about if Christians are helping those less fortunate or if those less fortunate are being trampled, which the Bible does speak out against. The matter at hand is the attitude of the heart when the charity is in progress. Is the Christian being charitable out of his or her love for God or because of the rules God laid out in His Word? Surely, the Christian became born again out of a rekindled relationship with God, not out of the

law. Therefore, each Christian should also work, move, live, and be charitable in that same gracious relationship. It is not about law; it is about love.

Another aspect of Christian charity is seeing the need and discerning one's ability to fulfill it. An almost never heard caution for generous Christians is to not give what they do not have. I am not saying that God cannot supernaturally provide, but God has already provided the disciple a certain amount with which to do His will. In Luke 16:10, Jesus lays some foundational framework for stewardship, "He who is faithful in a very little thing is faithful also in much; and he who is unrighteous in a very little thing is unrighteous also in much." The idea is to use what one is given to the glory of God, so the Christian's ability to give must be determined. When the lame beggar in Acts 3 asked for silver and gold, Peter and John did not have money to give. Instead they gave him out of what they did have, a link to the very Creator of the universe who could make the beggar walk again! One might postulate that Christians could look to a greater resource for charity than their own at times.

Lastly, a suggestion about the Christian's entire lifestyle must be discussed when asking how to be charitable. Mother Teresa is quoted as praying, "Lord, grant that I may seek to comfort rather than be comforted, to love rather than be loved" (389). The lifestyle of a Christian is at stake here because Christians are to be the salt and light of the world. We must show charity to those who are unfamiliar with moral, ethical, and spiritual matters, for these are part of who the Christian is, the part that the world needs from Christians. Mother Teresa suggests a lifestyle among those of the world, to go against her own nature to reach out to people. Christians, like Mother Teresa, should seek to be initiators of charity, not be sought out to give it. Christians should be looking for people to show charity to, not have people coming to them. God has placed within the regenerate soul a spiritual capacity or an attitude and heart to reach out when the need is observed. As James says in his letter, "Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world" (1:27).

One sees that the Word of God is liberal in the subject of charity. Be charitable to everyone whenever you can, however you can, with whatever you can; to these means give your all. But each time it is done, Christians should consider evaluating the attitude or heart that it was done in, the need and the abilities at which it was met, and the lifestyles both of the Christian and the receiver of charity. Many testimonies can be found in these principles, but many lessons for pastors can also be observed from incorrect understanding of the intricacies of Christian charity. There must be more than just money to give to others in this fallen world, such as time, effort, relationship, and so much more. The greatest charity ever given the Christian is eternal life from God the Father; the very least the Christian can do is pass on the reality of what could be however he or she can communicate it best.

Works Cited

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