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Charity, The Quiet Virtue

Most of us give things to people from time to time. But is our giving truly charity? Do we give because we love others?

By Helen H. Trutton

Illustration by Cindy Enright

*"Alas for the rarity
Of Christian charity
Under the sun!"*

Thomas Hood (1799–1845)

When I read the lines of this Victorian poet, I thought, "Have we changed much since his time? Do we fully understand and live the teachings of Paul about charity? Do we give in love as the Bible teaches?"

We do, of course, associate charity with love—charity is love, the pure love of Christ. But I believe many of us, Christians and nonChristians alike, think of charity as sharing that which is convenient.

Occasionally I clear my wardrobe of garments I no longer wear. I give them to a charitable organization. The clothing is in excellent condition; I just don't need or want it. One such day I suddenly realized that while my contributions would help clothe the poor I still was giving only what I didn't want. My motive was to make room in my closet. Was I giving from the heart? Or was I thinking of myself first? Was I really being charitable? After sorting the clothes, I reached for my Bible and read Paul's inspiring words:

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. (1 Cor. 13:1–2)

The *King James Version* consistently translates Paul's word here for love (*agape*) as "charity." *Agape* indicates a selfless, giving love that expresses the grace of God. Charity and love are inextricably intertwined.

After reading Paul's explanation of true charity, I began to understand the depth of love necessary to qualify me as a partaker of such a virtue. Love is greater than faith, prophecy, knowledge, and understanding. Surely then it is essential for me to seek charity with all my heart.

I recalled, that day when I was sorting the clothes, an incident a number of years ago when true love was demonstrated. Our home burned to the ground in the dead of an Idaho winter. My father, mother, and seven of us children were homeless. We had little to sustain us. As we stood heartbroken around the ruins, a cousin approached the smoldering fire and said to Dad, "John, our home is your home. Please come and live with us until you can build again." Tears streamed down my father's face as he humbly accepted. Cousin Jake had four children of his own, but somehow he made room for nine more people. We stayed until spring. His invitation was a gift from the heart. It was the kind of love of which Paul wrote.

Recently I spoke with a widow who reminisced lovingly about her late husband. "You know," she said, "when he received our Social Security check, he always remembered someone who needed food, so he'd go out and buy it and take it to the family." She smiled. "But we always managed just fine." He loved people.

The door of a family I know well is always open to those seeking advice or help, especially the young. Even more significant than giving of their means is their genuine love and deep concern for the welfare of each individual. Occasionally entire families have lived at their home until they could find suitable places of their own.

Numerous accounts could be cited of people opening their hearts to the poor and needy. C.C. Colton (1760–1832) wrote, "Did universal charity prevail, earth would be a heaven, and hell a fable." But we fail to make that a reality.

I have felt the need to renew the magnitude of Christ-like love in my heart frequently since the day I searched through my wardrobe for "give-aways." I still share with those in need, but my understanding and attitude have changed.

To assist me in improving daily, I have written down some of the qualifications Paul wrote of to the Corinthians, and have underscored the ones where I especially need to progress. The list hangs on the wall above my typewriter where I spend a few hours each day.

I need to love the Lord and my fellowman genuinely. That requires action. I must not tolerate envy, nor must I be puffed up or easily provoked. I must be kind. I need to be patient and think evil of no one. I must always rejoice in the truth. I must bear up under all things, believe in the midst of all things, hope and endure constantly.

Prayerfully reading and re-reading my list, I can begin a little to grasp the immensity of God's will

concerning charity. I can also be more aware of my weaknesses in different areas, and so can improve.

I remind myself often that while charity begins at home, it does not end at home. It is much more than alms-giving. Charity is a virtue of the heart—it is the love of Christ.

If ever I doubt the greatness of charity, I have only to read these words of Paul: “And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity” (1 Cor. 13:12; *KJV*).

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