

Lehman College

## **The Virtue of Charity**

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In Prudentius' epic poem, "*Psychomachia*," we witness a fierce struggle taking place between the vices and virtues of the human heart. The virtues ultimately triumph over their sinful counterparts, noble and righteous in the red-stained haze of the battle. If we fast forward from Prudentius' time to the modern 21<sup>st</sup> century, we find a different set of circumstances. The world has taken on a guise of comfort, success and innovation in order to conceal the depravity of greed, pride, and unjustifiable malice hidden underneath. Yet, the virtues are still very much alive today; they manage to slip into the good deeds and compassionate and kind hearts of most men and women. While all are important and powerful, I hold charity dear to my heart beyond the others. Charity is not revered on a marble pedestal for all to bask in its glory, but exists in so modest and small a scale that I cannot help but feel affection and even admiration for such a noble virtue.

The term charity often brings to mind the image of a few coins or a handful of crumpled green wads thrown into limp, bare hands. This is not entirely wrong; the act of giving is fundamental to the virtue of charity. Charity in Scripture, however, is not necessarily concerned with alms-giving, but rather, with love of a specific kind. There are four types of love which exist in the world today: *philia*, *storge*, *eros*, and *agape*. *Philia* is a heartfelt love: brotherly love that was displayed between Jesus and his closest disciple John. *Storge* is primarily employed for family affection. *Eros*, the most famous love in society, is sexual love. *Agape* is the highest and humblest of the four loves. It is not simply a feeling, but a motivation for action that we are free to choose or reject. *Agape* is a sacrificial love that voluntarily suffers inconvenience, discomfort and even pain for the benefit of another without expecting anything in return. In the great "love chapter"- 1 Corinthians 13- (King James version) *agape* is translated as "charity," while modern translations have more accurately depicted it as "love."

On the day of my parents' wedding, a close friend stitched a beautiful message for them in pale green thread. My parents framed this precious gift and hung it on a wall in our home. As a little girl, I would frequently stare at it. "Love is patient, love is kind." I had no idea what the message was trying to say, but I told myself very gravely that it had to mean something important.

Three years later, my eight-year old self was frowning at a sleeping baby inside a cradle. She was the daughter of my piano teacher. It wasn't that the newborn was particularly ugly; I envied the tiny creature for all the attention she garnered. I resolutely told myself that I would remain rooted in my jealousy, and walked away to announce my convictions to my mother. No one expected the baby would follow me so persistently as she grew up. I complained to the baby's mother that I couldn't go anywhere without being tailed, and the tired pianist paused before explaining to me that little Sharon was a curious child and apologized on her behalf. I scrunched my head in confusion before explaining that *I* was Sharon. Her eyes crinkled in amusement; I found myself staring at the little-half moons near the rims of those tired eyes as she patiently told me the baby had been named after me. I was momentarily stunned, then horribly ashamed when I thought on my past actions. To have someone named after you was an honor; I would tarnish it no longer. I swore to myself with childish determination that I would be a good role model and show little Sharon the wonders of the world. What happened, I cannot say with certainty. But from that very moment, a bond of kinship, friendship and mentorship began. I read aloud to her, brought snacks and kept a watchful eye when I heard her tiny feet pattering after me. As Sharon grew, I found myself expanding my duties, supporting and encouraging the girl when she was overwhelmed by familial responsibilities or insecurities revolving around her underperformance at school. I never stopped stressing the fact that she was not to be swayed by her demons, but

that she could love herself and be happy despite them. I gave willingly without a second thought, never thinking of anything that I could receive in return. It was a reward in itself to have tiny, grateful fingers wrap around mine, or to hear my name being called in enthusiastic joy. It was not until Sharon shyly confided in me that I had become a mother figure to her that I remembered the people who had also shown me charity or, rather, love.

In a world coated with harshness, charity and love are gentle breezes incredibly needed by society. It was my mother and father who stressed to me the importance of charity when they went out in the dreaded cold of winter and distributed hot soup to homeless people. They have shown me agape not for the purpose of becoming a 'good' person, but simply because of their love and affection as parents and caretakers. Countless times my parents have sacrificed sleep and personal pleasures for the sake of my education and well-being.

Many are aware of how much agape, or charity, could affect the world but choose not to act on such sentiments. Charity is so incredibly difficult to practice in a society where people are self-driven. As C.S. Lewis cautioned in *The Four Loves*,

To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything and your heart will be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact you must give it to no one, not even an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements. Lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket, safe, dark, motionless, airless, it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. To love is to be vulnerable. (Lewis 169.)

Vulnerability is what restrains my ability to give; fear of pain and emotional anguish rules my mind and stays my outstretched hand. But when I think these thoughts, I recall Colossians 3:12-14. "Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe

yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.” (*New International Version*.) The key, I believe, is to not give senselessly, but to pour out generosity with thought, sincerity and love. Charity teaches people to be kind and compassionate; it would not hurt the world to have a little bit more of it.

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