

On Charity

by John Wesley

Charity, or love, is the most important quality for a Christian to possess, and it is the only thing that can truly bring us closer to God.

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 13:1

Topics: "The Nature of Love", "True Religion"

Description

John Wesley emphasizes the paramount importance of charity, or love, in the Christian faith, arguing that without it, all other virtues and actions are meaningless. He explains that true charity is a selfless love for others that springs from the love of God, and it cannot be replaced by eloquence, knowledge, faith, or good works. Wesley warns that even the most impressive acts of faith or sacrifice are worthless if not accompanied by genuine love. He concludes that true religion is defined by holy tempers, and without love, all other religious practices are futile. The preacher calls for believers to prioritize love in their lives as the essence of true faith.

Transcript

"Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing. And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing." 1 Cor. 13:1-3.

We know, "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God," and is therefore true and right concerning all things. But we know, likewise, that there are some Scriptures which more immediately commend themselves to every man's conscience. In this rank we may place the passage before us; there are scarce any that object to it. On the contrary, the generality of men very readily appeal to it. Nothing is more common than to find even those who deny the authority of the Holy Scriptures, yet affirming, "This is my religion; that which is described in the thirteenth chapter of the Corinthians." Nay, even a Jew, Dr. Nunes, a Spanish physician, then settled at Savannah, in Georgia, used to say with great earnestness, "That Paul of Tarsus was one of the finest writers I have ever read. I wish the thirteenth chapter of his first letter to the Corinthians were wrote in letters of gold. And I wish every Jew were to carry it with him wherever he went." He judged, (and herein he certainly judged right,) that this single chapter contained the whole of true religion. It contains "whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely:

If there be any virtue, if there be any praise," it is all contained in this.

In order to see this in the clearest light, we may consider,

I. What the charity here spoken of is:

II. What those things are which are usually put in the place of it. We may then,

III. Observe, that neither any of them, nor all of them put together, can supply the want of it.

I. 1. We are, First, to consider what this charity is. What is the nature and what are the properties of it?

St. Paul's word is agapE, exactly answering to the plain English word love. And accordingly it is so rendered in all the old translations of the Bible. So it stood in William Tyndal's Bible, which, I suppose, was the first English translation of the whole Bible. So it was also in the Bible published by the authority of King Henry VIII. So it was likewise, in all the editions of the Bible that were successively published in England during the reign of King Edward VI., Queen Elizabeth, and King James I. Nay, so it is found in the Bibles of King Charles First's reign; I believe, to the period of it. The first Bibles I have seen wherein the word was changed, were those printed by Roger Daniel and John Field, printers to the Parliament, in the year 1649. Hence it seems probable that the alteration was made during the sitting of the Long Parliament; probably it was then the Latin word charity was put in the place of the English word love. It was in an unhappy hour this alteration was made; the ill effects of it remain to this day; and these may be observed, not only among the poor and illiterate; -- not only thousands of common men and women no more understand the word charity than they do the original Greek; -- but the same miserable mistake has diffused itself among men of education and learning. Thousands of these are misled thereby, and imagine that the charity treated of in this chapter refers chiefly, if not wholly, to outward actions, and to mean little more than almsgiving! I have heard many sermons preached upon this chapter, particularly before the University of Oxford. And I never heard more than one, wherein the meaning of it was not totally misrepresented. But had the old and proper word love been retained, there would have been no room for misrepresentation.

2. But what kind of love is that whereof the Apostle is speaking throughout the chapter? Many persons of eminent learning and piety apprehend that it is the love of God. But from reading the whole chapter numberless times, and considering it in every light, I am thoroughly persuaded that what St. Paul is here directly speaking of is the love of our neighbour. I believe whoever carefully weighs the whole tenor of his discourse will be fully convinced of this. But it must be allowed to be such a love of our neighbour, as can only spring from the love of God. And whence does this love of God flow? Only from that faith which is of the operation of God; which whoever has, has a direct evidence that, "God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself." When this is particularly applied to his heart, so that he can say with humble boldness, "The life which I now live, I live by the faith in the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me;" then, and not till then, "the love of God is shed abroad in his heart." And this love sweetly constrains him to love every child of man with the love which is here spoken of; not with a love of esteem or of complacence; for this can have no place with regard to those who are (if not his personal enemies, yet) enemies to God and their own souls; but with a love of benevolence, -- of tender good-will to all the souls that God has made.

3. But it may be asked, "If there be no true love of our neighbour, but that which springs from the love of God; and if the love of God flows from no other fountain than faith in the Son of God; does it not follow, that the whole heathen world is excluded from all possibility of salvation? Seeing they are cut off from

faith; for faith cometh by hearing; and how shall they hear without a preacher?" I answer, St. Paul's words, spoken on another occasion, are applicable to this: "What the law speaketh, it speaketh to them that are under the law." Accordingly, that sentence, "He that believeth not shall be damned," is spoken of them to whom the Gospel is preached. Others it does not concern; and we are not required to determine any thing touching their final state. How it will please God, the Judge of all, to deal with them, we may leave to God himself. But this we know, that he is not the God of the Christians only, but the God of the Heathens also; that he is "rich in mercy to all that call upon him," according to the light they have; and that "in every nation, he that feareth God and worketh righteousness is accepted of him."

4. But to return. This is the nature of that love whereof the Apostle is here speaking. But what are the properties of it, -- the fruits which are inseparable from it? The Apostle reckons up many of them; but the principal of them are these.

First. "Love is not puffed up." As is the measure of love, so is the measure of humility. Nothing humbles the soul so deeply as love: It casts out all "high conceits, engendering pride;" all arrogance and overweening; makes us little, and poor, and base, and vile in our own eyes. It abases us both before God and man; makes us willing to be the least of all, and the servants of all, and teaches us to say, "A mote in the sun-beam is little, but I am infinitely less in the presence of God."

5. Secondly, "Love is not provoked." Our present English translation renders it, "is not easily provoked." But how did the word easily come in? There is not a tittle of it in the text: The words of the Apostle are simply these, οὐ παροξυνεται. Is it not probable, it was inserted by the translators with a design to excuse St. Paul, for fear his practice should appear to contradict his doctrine? For we read, (Acts 15:36, et seq.) "And some days after, Paul said unto Barnabas, Let us go again and visit our brethren in every city where we have preached the word of the Lord, and see how they do. And Barnabas determined to take with them John, whose surname was Mark. But Paul thought not good to take with them who departed from the work. And the contention was so sharp between them that they departed asunder one from the other: And so Barnabas took Mark, and sailed unto Cyprus; and Paul chose Silas, and departed; being recommended by the brethren unto the grace of God. And he went through Syria and Cilicia, confirming the churches."

6. Would not any one think, on reading these words, that they were both equally sharp? That Paul was just as hot as Barnabas, and as much wanting in love as he? But the text says no such thing; as will be plain, if we consider first the occasion. When St. Paul proposed, that they should "again visit the brethren in every city where they had preached the word," so far they were agreed. "And Barnabas determined to take with them John," because he was his sister's son, without receiving or asking St. Paul's advice. "But Paul thought not good to take him with them who had departed from them from Pamphylia," -- whether through sloth or cowardice, -- "went not with them to the work." And undoubtedly he thought right; he had reason on his side. The following words are, καὶ ἐγένετο οὐν παροξυσμός, literally, "and there was a fit of anger." It does not say, in St. Paul: Probably it was in Barnabas alone; who thus supplied the want of reason with passion; "so that they parted asunder." And Barnabas, resolved to have his own way, did as his nephew had done before, "departed from the work," -- "took Mark with him, and sailed to Cyprus." But Paul went on his work, "being recommended by the brethren to the grace of God;" which Barnabas seems not to have stayed for. "And he went through Syria and Cilicia, confirming the Churches." From the whole account, it does not appear that St. Paul was in any fault; that he either felt any temper, or spoke any word, contrary to the law of love. Therefore, not being in any fault, he does not need any excuse.

7. Certainly he who is full of love is "gentle towards all men." He "in meekness instructs those that oppose themselves;" that oppose what he loves most, even the truth of God, or that holiness without which no man shall see the Lord: Not knowing but "God, peradventure, may bring them to the knowledge of the truth." However provoked, he does "not return evil for evil, or railing for railing." Yea, he "blesses those that curse him, and does good to them that despitefully use him and persecute him." He "is not overcome of evil, but" always "overcomes evil with good."

8. Thirdly. "Love is longsuffering." It endures not a few affronts, reproaches, injuries; but all things, which God is pleased to permit either men or devils to inflict. It arms the soul with inviolable patience; not harsh stoical patience, but yielding as the air, which, making no resistance to the stroke, receives no harm thereby. The lover of mankind remembers Him who suffered for us, "leaving us an example that we might tread in his steps." Accordingly, "if his enemy hunger, he feeds him; if he thirst, he gives him drink:" And by so doing, he "heaps coals of fire," of melting love, upon his head. "And many waters cannot quench this love; neither can the floods" of ingratitude "drown it."

II. 1. We are, Secondly, to inquire, what those things are, which, it is commonly supposed, will supply the place of love. And the first of these is eloquence; a faculty of talking well, particularly on religious subjects. Men are generally inclined to think well of one that talks well. If he speaks properly and fluently of God, and the things of God, who can doubt of his being in God's favour? And it is very natural for him to think well of himself; to have as favourable an opinion of himself as others have.

2. But men of reflection are not satisfied with this: They are not content with a flood of words; they prefer thinking before talking, and judge, one that knows much is far preferable to one that talks much. And it is certain, knowledge is an excellent gift of God; particularly knowledge of the Holy Scriptures, in which are contained all the depths of divine knowledge and wisdom. Hence it is generally thought that a man of much knowledge, knowledge of Scripture in particular, must not only be in the favour of God, but likewise enjoy a high degree of it.

3. But men of deeper reflection are apt to say, "I lay no stress upon any other knowledge, but the knowledge of God by faith. Faith is the only knowledge, which, in the sight of God, is of great price. 'We are saved by faith;' by faith alone: This is the one thing needful. He that believeth, and he alone, shall be saved everlastingly." There is much truth in this: It is unquestionably true, that "we are saved by faith:" Consequently, that "he that believeth shall be saved, and he that believeth not shall be damned."

4. But some men will say, with the Apostle James, "Show me thy faith without thy works;" (if thou canst, but indeed it is impossible;) "and I will show thee my faith by my works." And many are induced to think that good works, works of piety and mercy, are of far more consequence than faith itself, and will supply the want of every other qualification for heaven. Indeed this seems to be the general sentiment, not only of the members of the Church of Rome, but of Protestants also; not of the giddy and thoughtless, but the serious members of our own Church.

5. And this cannot be denied, our Lord himself hath said, "Ye shall know them by their fruits:" By their works ye know them that believe, and them that believe not. But yet it may be doubted, whether there is not a surer proof of the sincerity of our faith than even our works, that is, our willingly suffering for righteousness' sake: Especially if, after suffering reproach, and pain, and loss of friends and substance, a man gives up life itself; yea, by a shameful and painful death, by giving his body to be burned, rather than he would give up faith and a good conscience by neglecting his known duty.

6. It is proper to observe here, First, what a beautiful gradation there is, each step rising above the other, in the enumeration of those several things which some or other of those that are called Christians, and are usually accounted so, really believe will supply the absence of love. St. Paul begins at the lowest point, talking well, and advances step by step; every one rising higher than the preceding, till he comes to the highest of all. A step above eloquence is knowledge: Faith is a step above this. Good works are a step above that faith; and even above this, is suffering for righteousness' sake. Nothing is higher than this, but Christian love; the love of our neighbour, flowing from the love of God.

7. It may be proper to observe, Secondly, that whatever passes for religion in any part of the Christian world, (whether it be a part of religion, or no part at all, but either folly, superstition, or wickedness,) may with very little difficulty be reduced to one or other of these heads. Every thing which is supposed to be religion, either by Protestants or Romanists, and is not, is contained under one or another of these five particulars. Make trial as often as you please, with anything that is called religion, but improperly so called, and you will find the rule to hold without any exception.

III. 1. I am now, in the Third place, to demonstrate, to all who have ears to hear, who do not harden themselves against conviction, that neither any one of these five qualifications, nor all of them together, will avail anything before God, without the love above described.

In order to do this in the clearest manner, we may consider them one by one. And, First, "though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels;" -- with an eloquence such as never was found in men, concerning the nature, attributes, and works of God, whether of creation or providence; though I were not herein a whit behind the chief of the apostles; preaching like St. Peter, and praying like St. John; -- yet unless humble, gentle, patient love, be the ruling temper of my soul, I am no better, in the judgment of God, "than sounding brass, or a rumbling cymbal." The highest eloquence, therefore, either in private conversation, or in public ministrations, -- the brightest talents either for preaching or prayer, -- if they were not joined with humble, meek, and patient resignation, might sink me the deeper into hell, but will not bring me one step nearer heaven.

2. A plain instance may illustrate this. I knew a young man between fifty and sixty years ago, who, during the course of several years, never endeavoured to convince any one of a religious truth, but he was convinced; and he never endeavoured to persuade any one to engage in a religious practice, but he was persuaded: What then? All that power of convincing speech, all that force of persuasion, if it was not joined with meekness and lowliness, with resignation and patient love, would no more qualify him for the fruition of God, than a clear voice, or a fine complexion. Nay, it would rather procure him a hotter place in everlasting burnings!

3. Secondly. "Though I have the gift of prophecy," -- of foretelling those future events which no creature can foresee; and "though I understand all" the "mysteries" of nature, of providence, and the word of God; and "have all knowledge" of things, divine or human, that any mortal ever attained to; though I can explain the most mysterious passages of Daniel, of Ezekiel, and the Revelation; -- yet if I have not humility, gentleness, and resignation, "I am nothing" in the sight of God.

A little before the conclusion of the late war in Flanders, one who came from thence gave us a very strange relation. I knew not what judgment to form of this, but waited till John Haime should come over, of whose veracity I could no more doubt than of his understanding. The account he gave was this: "Jonathan Pyrah was a member of our Society in Flanders. I knew him some years, and knew him to be a man of

unblamable character. One day he was summoned to appear before the Board of General Officers. One of them said, 'What is this which we hear of you? We hear you are turned prophet, and that you foretel the downfall of the bloody house of Bourbon, and the haughty house of Austria. We should be glad if you were a real prophet, and if your prophecies came true. But what sign do you give, to convince us you are so, and that your predictions will come to pass?' He readily answered, 'Gentlemen, I give you a sign: To-morrow, at twelve o'clock, you shall have such a storm of thunder and lightning as you never had before since you came into Flanders. I give you a second sign: As little as any of you expect any such thing, as little appearance of it as there is now, you shall have a general engagement with the French within three days. I give you a third sign: I shall be ordered to advance in the first line. If I am a false prophet, I shall be shot dead at the first discharge; but if I am a true prophet, I shall only receive a musket-ball in the calf of my left leg.' At twelve the next day there was such thunder and lightning as they never had before in Flanders. On the third day, contrary to all expectation, was the general battle of Fontenoy. He was ordered to advance in the first line; and, at the very first discharge, he did receive a musket-ball in the calf of his left leg."

4. And yet all this profited him nothing, either for temporal or eternal happiness. When the war was over, he returned to England; but the story was got before him: In consequence of which he was sent for by the Countess of St--s, and several other persons of quality, who were desirous to receive so surprising an account from his own mouth. He could not bear so much honour. It quite turned his brain. In a little time he ran stark mad. And so he continues to this day, living still, as I apprehend, on Wibsey Moorside, within a few miles of Leeds. [At the time of writing this sermon. He is since dead.]

5. And what would it profit a man to "have all knowledge," even that which is infinitely preferable to all other, -- the knowledge of the Holy Scripture? I knew a young man about twenty years ago, who was so thoroughly acquainted with the Bible, that if he was questioned concerning any Hebrew word in the Old, or any Greek word in the New Testament, he would tell, after a little pause, not only how often the one or the other occurred in the Bible, but also what it meant in every place. His name was Thomas Walsh. [His Journal, written by himself, is extant.] Such a master of Biblic knowledge I never saw before, and never expect to see again. Yet if, with all his knowledge, he had been void of love; if he had been proud, passionate, or impatient; he and all his knowledge would have perished together, as sure as ever he was born.

6. "And though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains." -- The faith which is able to do this cannot be the fruit of vain imagination, a mere madman's dream, a system of opinions; but must be a real work of God: Otherwise it could not have such an effect. Yet if this faith does not work by love, if it does not produce universal holiness, if it does not bring forth lowliness, meekness, and resignation, it will profit me nothing. This is as certain a truth as any that is delivered in the whole oracles of God. All faith that is, that ever was, or ever can be, separate from tender benevolence to every child of man, friend or foe, Christian, Jew, Heretic, or Pagan, -- separate from gentleness to all men; separate from resignation in all events, and contentedness in all conditions, -- is not the faith of a Christian, and will stand us in no stead before the face of God.

7. Hear ye this, all you that are called Methodists! You, of all men living, are most concerned herein. You constantly speak of salvation by faith: And you are in the right for so doing. You maintain, (one and all,) that a man is justified by faith, without the works of the law. And you cannot do otherwise, without giving up the Bible, and betraying your own souls. You insist upon it, that we are saved by faith: And, undoubtedly, so we are. But consider, meantime, that let us have ever so much faith, and be our faith ever

so strong, it will never save us from hell, unless it now save us from all unholy tempers, from pride, passion, impatience; from all arrogance of spirit, all haughtiness and overbearing; from wrath, anger, bitterness; from discontent, murmuring, fretfulness, peevishness. We are of all men most inexcusable, if, having been so frequently guarded against that strong delusion, we still, while we indulge any of these tempers, bless ourselves, and dream we are in the way to heaven!

8. Fourthly. "Although I give all my goods to the poor;" -- though I divide all my real and all my personal estate into small portions, (so the original word properly signifies,) and diligently bestow it on those who, I have reason to believe, are the most proper objects; -- yet if I am proud, passionate, or discontented; if I give way to any of these tempers; whatever good I may do to others, I do none to my own soul. O how pitiable a case is this! Who would not grieve that these beneficent men should lose all their labour! It is true, many of them have a reward in this world, if not before, yet after their death. They have costly and pompous funerals. They have marble monuments of the most exquisite workmanship. They have epitaphs wrote in the most elegant strain, which extol their virtues to the skies. Perhaps they have yearly orations spoken over them, to transmit their memory to all generations. So have many founders of religious houses, of colleges, alms-houses, and most charitable institutions. And it is an allowed rule, that none can exceed in the praise of the founder of his house, college, or hospital. But still what a poor reward is this! Will it add to their comfort or to their misery, suppose (which must be the case if they did not die in faith) that they are in the hands of the devil and his angels? What insults, what cutting reproaches, would these occasion, from their infernal companions! O that they were wise! that all those who are zealous of good works would put them in their proper place; would not imagine they can supply the want of holy tempers, but take care that they may spring from them!

9. How exceeding strange must this sound in the ears of most of those who are, by the courtesy of England, called Christians! But stranger still is that assertion of the Apostle, which comes in the last place: "Although I give my body to be burned, and have not love, it profiteth me nothing." Although rather than deny the faith, rather than commit a known sin, or omit a known duty, I voluntarily submit to a cruel death; "deliver up my body to be burned;" yet if I am under the power of pride, or anger, or fretfulness, -- "it profiteth me nothing."

10. Perhaps this may be illustrated by an example. We have a remarkable account in the tracts of Dr. Geddes -- a Civilian, who was Envoy from Queen Anne to the Court of Portugal, in the latter end of her reign. He was present at one of those *Autos de Fes*, "Acts of Faith," wherein the Roman Inquisitors burned heretics alive. One of the persons who was then brought out for execution, having been confined in the dungeons of the Inquisition, had not seen the sun for many years. It proved a bright sunshiny day. Looking up, he cried out in surprise, "O how can anyone who sees that glorious luminary, worship any but the God that made it!" A friar standing by, ordered them to run an iron gag through his lips, that he might speak no more. Now, what did that poor man feel within when this order was executed? If he said in his heart, though he could not utter it with his lips, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do," undoubtedly the angels of God were ready to carry his soul into Abraham's bosom. But if, instead of this, he cherished the resentment in his heart which he could not express with his tongue, although his body was consumed by the flames, I will not say his soul went to paradise.

11. The sum of all that has been observed is this: Whatever I speak, whatever I know, whatever I believe, whatever I do, whatever I suffer; if I have not the faith that worketh by love, that produces love to God and all mankind, I am not in the narrow way which leadeth to life, but in the broad road that leadeth to destruction. In other words: Whatever eloquence I have; whatever natural or supernatural knowledge;

whatever faith I have received from God; whatever works I do, whether of piety or mercy; whatever sufferings I undergo for conscience' sake, even though I resist unto blood: All these things put together, however applauded of men, will avail nothing before God, unless I am meek and lowly in heart, and can say in all things, "Not as I will, but as thou wilt!"

12. We conclude from the whole, (and it can never be too much inculcated, because all the world votes on the other side,) that true religion, in the very essence of it, is nothing short of holy tempers. Consequently all other religion, whatever name it bears, whether Pagan, Mahometan, Jewish, or Christian; and whether Popish or Protestant, Lutheran or Reformed; without these, is lighter than vanity itself.

13. Let every man, therefore, that has a soul to be saved see that he secure this one point. With all his eloquence, his knowledge, his faith, works, and sufferings, let him hold fast this "one thing needful." He that through the power of faith endureth to the end in humble, gentle, patient love; he, and he alone, shall, through the merits of Christ, "inherit the kingdom prepared from the foundation of the world."

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