

Isaiah 58:7-8

by Samuel Johnson

The sermon emphasizes the importance of charity and its benefits in promoting virtue and resisting poverty, and encourages listeners to practice charity in their daily lives.

Scripture: Proverbs 19:17, Proverbs 22:9, Isaiah 58:7, Matthew 25:35, Luke 6:38, Galatians 6:2, Ephesians 4:32, Hebrews 13:16, James 2:14, 1 John 3:17

Topics: "Christian Charity", "Faith And Works"

Description

Samuel Johnson preaches about the importance of charity and compassion towards the needy and distressed, emphasizing that God requires us to help those in need as a tribute of gratitude for His blessings. He highlights how charity not only benefits the recipients but also promotes virtue and protects individuals from falling into sin, especially in the face of poverty and temptation. Johnson urges the congregation to reflect on the shortness of life and the eternal rewards of practicing charity, reminding them that true charity arises from faith in God's promises and expects rewards in the afterlife.

Transcript

Isaiah 58:7-8

Is it not to deal thy bread to the hungry, and that thou bring the poor that are cast out to thy house: when thou seest the naked that thou cover him, and that thou hide not thyself from thine own flesh? Then shall thy light break forth as the morning, and thine health shall spring forth speedily; and thy righteousness shall go before thee, the glory of the Lord shall be thy reward.

If the necessity of every duty is to be estimated by the frequency with which it is inculcated, and the sanctions by which it is enforced; if the great Lawgiver of the universe, whose will is immutable, and whose decrees are established for ever, may be supposed to regard, in a particular manner, the observation of those commands, which seem to be repeated only that they may be strongly impressed, and secured, by an habitual submission, from violation and neglect, there is scarcely any virtue, that we ought more diligently to exercise than that of compassion to the needy and distressed.

If we look into the state of mankind, and endeavour to deduce the will of God from the visible disposition of things, we find no duty, more necessary to the support of order, and the happiness of society, nor any, of which we are more often reminded, by opportunities of practicing it, or which is more strongly urged upon us, by importunate solicitations and affecting objects.

If we inquire into the opinions of those men, on whom God conferred superior wisdom, in the heathen world, all their suffrages will be found united in this great point. Amidst all their wild opinions, and chimerical systems, the sallies of unguided imagination, and the errors of bewildered reason; they have all endeavoured to evince the necessity of beneficence, and agreed to assign the first rank of excellence to him, who most contributes to improve the happiness, and to soften the miseries of life.

But we, who are blessed with clearer light, and taught to know the will of our Maker, not from long deductions from variable appearances, or intricate disquisitions of fallible reason, but by messengers inspired by himself, and enabled to prove their mission, by works above the power of created beings, may spare ourselves the labour of tedious inquiries. The holy scriptures are in our hands; the scriptures which are able to make us wise unto salvation, and by them we may be sufficiently informed of the extent and importance of this great duty; a duty enjoined, explained, and enforced, by Moses and the prophets, by the evangelists and apostles, by the precepts of Solomon, and the example of Christ.

From those, to whom large possessions have been transmitted by their ancestors, or whose industry has been blessed with success, God always requires the tribute of charity: he commands that what he has given be enjoyed in imitating his bounty, in dispensing happiness, and cheering poverty, in easing the pains of disease, and lightening the burden of oppression; he commands that the superfluity of bread be dealt to the hungry; and the raiment, which the possessor cannot use, be bestowed upon the naked, and that no man turn away from his own flesh.

This is a tribute, which it is difficult to imagine that any man can be unwilling to pay, as an acknowledgement of his dependence upon the universal Benefactor, and an humble testimony of his confidence in that protection, without which, the strongest foundations of human power must fail at the first shock of adversity, and the highest fabrics of earthly greatness sink into ruin; without which wealth is only a floating vapour, and policy an empty sound.

But such is the prevalence of temptations, not early resisted; such the depravity of minds, by which unlawful desires have been long indulged, and false appearances of happiness pursued with ardour and pertinaciousness; so much are we influenced by example, and so diligently do we labour to deceive ourselves, that it is not uncommon to find the sentiments of benevolence almost extinguished, and all regard to the welfare of others overborne by a perpetual attention to immediate advantage and contracted views of present interest.

When any man has sunk into a state of insensibility like this, when he has learned to act only by the impulse of apparent profit, when he can look upon distress, without partaking it, and hear the cries of poverty and sickness, without a wish to relieve them; when he has so far disordered his ideas as to value wealth without regard to its end, and to amass with eagerness what is of no use in his hands; he is indeed not easily to be reclaimed; his reason, as well as his passions, is in combination against his soul, and there is little hope, that either persuasion will soften, or arguments convince him. A man, once hardened in cruelty by inveterate avarice, is scarcely to be considered as any longer human; nor is it to be hoped, that any impression can be made upon him, by methods applicable only to reasonable beings. Beneficence and compassion can be awakened in such hearts only by the operation of divine grace, and must be the effect of a miracle, like that which turned the dry rock into a springing well.

Let every one, that considers this state of obdurate wickedness, that is struck with horror at the mention of a man void of pity, that feels resentment at the name of oppression, and melts with sorrow at the voice of

misery, remember that those who have now lost all these sentiments, were originally formed with passions, and instincts, and reason, like his own: let him reflect, that he, who now stands most firmly, may fall by negligence, and that negligence arises from security. Let him therefore observe, by what gradations men sink into perdition, by what insensible deviations they wander from the ways of virtue, till they are scarce able to return; and let him be warned by their example, to avoid the original causes of depravity, and repel the first attacks of unreasonable self-love; let him meditate on the excellence of charity, and improve those seeds of benevolence, which are implanted in every mind, but which will not produce fruit without care and cultivation.

Such meditations are always necessary for the promotion of virtue; for a careless and inattentive mind easily forgets its importance, and it will be practiced only with a degree of ardour, proportioned to the sense of our obligations to it.

To assist such reflections, to confirm the benevolence of the liberal, and to show those who have lived without regard to the necessities of others, the absurdity of their conduct, I shall inquire,

First, Into the nature of charity; and

Secondly, Into the advantages arising from the exercise of it.

First, I shall inquire into the nature of charity.

By charity is to be understood every assistance of weakness, or supply of wants, produced by a desire of benefiting others, and of pleasing God. Not every act of liberality, every increase of the wealth of another, not every flow of negligent profusion, or thoughtless start of sudden munificence, is to be dignified with this venerable name. There are many motives to the appearance of bounty very different from those of true charity, and which, with whatever success they may be imposed upon mankind, will be distinguished at the last day by Him to whom all hearts are open. It is not impossible, that men whose chief desire is esteem and applause, who court the favour of the multitude, and think fame the great end of action, may squander their wealth in such a manner, that some part of it may benefit the virtuous or miserable; but as the guilt, so the virtue, of every action arises from design; and those blessings which are bestowed by chance, will be of very little advantage to him that scattered them with no other prospect than that of hearing his own praises; praises, of which he will not be often disappointed, but of which our Lord has determined, that they shall be his reward. If any man, in the distribution of his favours, finds the desire of engaging gratitude, or gaining affection, to predominate in his mind; if he finds his benevolence weakened, by observing that his favours are forgotten, and that those whom he has most studiously benefited, are often least zealous for his service, he ought to remember, that he is not acting upon the proper motives of charity. For true charity arises from faith in the promises of God, and expects rewards only in a future state. To hope for our recompence in this life, is not beneficence, but usury.

And surely charity may easily subsist without temporal motives, when it is considered, that it is by the exercise of charity alone that we are enabled to receive any solid advantage from present prosperity, and to appropriate to ourselves any possession beyond the possibility of losing it. Of the uncertainty of success, and the instability of greatness, we have examples every day before us. Scarcely can any man turn his eyes upon the world, without observing the sudden rotations of affairs, the ruin of the affluent, and the downfall of the high; and it may reasonably be hoped, that no man, to whom opportunities of such observations occur, can forbear applying them to his own condition, and reflecting, that what he now contemplates in another he may, in a few days experience himself.

By those reflections he must be naturally led to inquire, how he may fix such fugitive advantages; how he shall hinder his wealth from flying away, and leaving him nothing but melancholy, disappointment, and remorse. This he can effect only by the practice of charity, by dealing his bread to the hungry, and bringing the poor that is cast out to his house. By these means only he can lay up for himself treasures in heaven, where neither rust nor moth doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through and steal. By a liberal distribution of his riches, he can place them above the reach of the spoiler, and exempt them from accident and danger; can purchase to himself that satisfaction which no power on earth can take away; and make them the means of happiness, when they are no longer in his hands. He may procure, by this means of his wealth, what he will find to be obtained by no other method of applying an alleviation of the sorrows of age, of the pains of sickness, and of the agonies of death.

To enforce the duty of charity, it is so far from being necessary to produce any arguments drawn from a narrow view of our condition, a view restrained to this world, that the chief reason for which it is to be practised is the shortness and uncertainty of life. To a man who considers for what purpose he was created, and why he was placed in his present state, how short a time, at most, is allotted to his earthly duration, and how much of that time may be cut off; how can any thing give real satisfaction that terminates in this life? How can he imagine that any acquisition can deserve his labour, which has no tendency to the perfection of his mind? Or how can any enjoyment engage his desires, but that of a pure conscience, and reasonable expectations of a more happy and permanent existence? Whatever superiority may distinguish us, and whatever plenty may surround us, we know that they can be possessed but a short time, and that the manner in which we employ them must determine our eternal state; and what need can there be of any argument for the use of them, agreeable to the command of him that bestowed them? What stronger incitement can any man require to a due consideration of the poor and needy, than that the Lord will deliver him in the day of trouble; in that day when the shadow of death shall compass him about, and all the vanities of the world shall fade away, when all the comforts of this life shall forsake him, when pleasure shall no longer delight, nor power protect him? In that dreadful hour shall the man, whose care has been extended to the general happiness of mankind, whose charity has rescued sickness from the grave, and poverty from the dungeon; who has heard the groans of the aged, struggling with misfortunes, and the cries of infants languishing with hunger, find favour in the sight of the great Author of society, and his recompence shall flow upon him from the fountain of mercy; he shall stand without fear on the brink of life, and pass into eternity with an humble confidence of finding that mercy which he has never denied. His righteousness shall go before him, and the glory of the Lord shall be his re-reward.(1)

These blessings, and these rewards, are to be gained by the due use of riches; but they are not confined to the rich, or unattainable by those whom Providence has placed in lower stations. Charity is an universal duty, which it is in every man's power sometimes to practise; since every degree of assistance given to another, upon proper motives, is an act of charity; and therefore is scarcely any man, in such a state of imbecility, as that he may not, on some occasions, benefit his neighbour. He that cannot relieve the poor may instruct the ignorant; and he that cannot attend the sick may reclaim the vicious. He that can give little assistance himself may yet perform the duty of charity, by inflaming the ardour of others, and recommending the petitions, which he cannot grant, to those who have more to bestow. The widow that shall give her mite to the treasury, the poor man who shall bring to the thirsty a cup of cold water, shall not lose their reward.

And that this reward is not without reason decreed to the beneficent, and that the duty of charity is not exalted above its natural dignity and importance, will appear, by considering,

Secondly, The benefits arising from the exercise of charity.

The chief advantage which is received by mankind from the practice of charity, is the promotion of virtue amongst those who are most exposed to such temptations as it is not easy to surmount: temptations of which no man can say that he should be able to resist them, to estimate the force, and represent the danger.

We see every day men blessed with abundance, and revelling in delight, yet overborne by ungovernable desires of increasing their acquisitions; and breaking through the boundaries of religion, to pile heaps on heaps, and add one superfluity to another, to obtain only nominal advantages and imaginary pleasures.

For these we see friendships broken, justice violated, and nature forgotten; we see crimes committed, without the prospect of obtaining any positive pleasure, or removing any real pain. We see men toiling through meanness and guilt, to obtain that which they can enjoy only in idea, and which will supply them with nothing real which they do not already abundantly possess.

If men formed by education and enlightened by experience, men whose observations of the world cannot but have shown them the necessity of virtue, and who are able to discover the enormity of wickedness, by tracing its original, and pursuing its consequences, can fall before such temptations, and, in opposition to knowledge and conviction, prefer to the happiness of pleasing God the flatteries of dependants, or the smiles of power; what may not be expected from him who is pushed forward into sin by the impulse of poverty, who lives in continual want of what he sees wasted by thousands in negligent extravagance, and whose pain is every moment aggravated by the contempt of those whom nature has subjected to the same necessities with himself, and who are only his superior by that wealth which they know not how to possess with moderation or decency?

How strongly may such a man be tempted to declare war upon the prosperous and the great! With what obstinacy and fury may he rush on from one outrage to another, impelled on one part by the pressure of necessity, and attracted on the other by the prospect of happiness; of happiness, which he sees sufficient to elevate those that possess it above the consideration of their own nature, and to turn them away from their own flesh; that happiness, which appears greater by being compared with his own misery, and which he admires the more because he cannot approach it. He that finds in himself every natural power of enjoyment will envy the tables of the luxurious, and the splendor of the proud; he who feels the cold of nakedness, and the faintness of hunger, cannot but be provoked to snatch that bread which is devoured by excess, and that raiment which is only worn as the decoration of vanity. Resentment may easily combine with want, and incite him to return neglect with violence.

Such are the temptations of poverty; and who is there that can say, that he has not sometimes forsaken virtue upon weaker motives? Let any man reflect upon the snares to which poverty exposes virtue, and remember how certainly one crime makes way for another, till at last all distinction of good and evil is obliterated; and he will easily discover the necessity of charity to preserve a great part of mankind from the most atrocious wickedness.

The great rule of action, by which we are directed to do to others whatever we would that others should do to us, may be extended to God himself; whatever we ask of God, we ought to be ready to bestow on our

neighbour; if we pray to be forgiven, we must forgive those that trespass against us; and is it not equally reasonable, when we implore from providence our daily bread, that we deal our bread to the hungry? And that we rescue others from being betrayed by want into sin, when we pray that we may not ourselves be led into temptation?

Poverty, for the greatest part, produces ignorance; and ignorance facilitates the attack of temptation. For how should any man resist the solicitations of appetite, or the influence of passion, without any sense of their guilt, or dread of their punishment? How should he avoid the paths of vice, who never was directed to the way of virtue?

For this reason, no method of charity is more efficacious than that which at once enlightens ignorance and relieves poverty, that implants virtue in the mind, and wards off the blasts of indigence that might destroy it in the bloom. Such is the charity of which an opportunity is now offered; charity by which those who would probably without assistance be the burdens or terrors of the community, by growing up in idleness and vice, are enabled to support themselves by useful employments, and glorify God by reasonable service.

Such are the general motives which the religion of Jesus affords to the general exercise of charity, and such are the particular motives for our laying hold of the opportunity which providence has this day put into our power for the practice of it; motives, no less than the hope of everlasting happiness, and the fear of punishment which shall never end. Such incitements are surely sufficient to quicken the slowest, and animate the coldest; and if there can be imagined any place in which they must be more eminently prevalent, it must be the place (2) where we now reside. The numerous frequenters of this place constitute a mixed assemblage of the happy and miserable. Part of this audience has resorted hither to alleviate the miseries of sickness, and part to divert the satiety of pleasure; part because they are disabled, by diseases, to prosecute the employment of their station, and part because their station has allotted them, in their own opinion, no other business than to pursue their pleasures. Part have exhausted the medicines, and part have worn out the delights of every other place; and these contrary conditions are so mingled together, that in few places are the miseries of life so severely felt, or its pleasures more luxuriously enjoyed.

To each of these states of life may the precepts of charity be enforced with eminent propriety, and unanswerable arguments. Those whose only complaint is a surfeit of felicity, and whose fearless and confident gaiety brings them hither, rather to waste health than to repair it, cannot surely be so intent upon the constant succession of amusements which vanity and affluence have provided, as not sometimes to turn their thoughts upon those whom poverty and ignorance have cut off from enjoyment, and consigned a prey to wickedness, to misery, and to want. If their amusements afford them the satisfaction which the eager repetition of them seems to declare, they must certainly pity those who live in sight of so much happiness, which they can only view from a distance, but can never reach; and those whom they pity, they cannot surely hear the promises made to charity without endeavouring to relieve. But if, as the wisest among the votaries of pleasure have confessed, they feel themselves unsatisfied and deluded; if, as they own, their ardour is kept up by dissimulation, and they lay aside their appearance of felicity, when they retire from the eyes of those among whom they desire to propagate the deceit; if they feel that they shall rise to-morrow to chase an empty good which they have often grasped at, but could never hold; they may surely spare something for the purchase of solid satisfaction, and cut off part of that expense by which nothing is procured, for the sake of giving to others those necessities which the common wants of our being demand, and by the distribution of which they may lay up some treasures of happiness against that day which is stealing upon them, the day of age, of sickness, and of death, in which they shall be able to

reflect with pleasure on no other part of their time passed here, but that which was spent in the duties of charity. But, if these shall harden their dispositions, if these shall withhold their hands, let them not amuse themselves with the general excuses, or dream that any plea of inability will be accepted from those who squander wealth upon trifles, and trust sums that might relieve the wants of multitudes, to the skill of play, and the uncertainties of chance.

To those to whom languishment and sickness have shown the instability of all human happiness, I hope it will not be requisite to enforce the necessity of securing to themselves a state of unshaken security, and unchangeable enjoyment. To inculcate the shortness of life to those who feel hourly decays, or to expiate on the miseries of disease and poverty to them whom pain perhaps, at this instant, is dragging to the grave, would be a needless waste of that time which their condition admonishes them to spend, not in hearing, but in practising their duty. And of sickness, charity seems the peculiar employment, because it is an act of piety which can be practised with such slight and transient attention as pain and faintness may allow. To the sick therefore I may be allowed to pronounce the last summons to this mighty work, which perhaps the divine providence will allow them to hear. Remember thou! that now the faintest under the weight of long-continued maladies, that to thee, more emphatically, the night cometh in which no man can work; and therefore say not to him that asketh thee, "Go away now, and to-morrow I will give." To-morrow? To-morrow is all uncertain, to thee almost hopeless; to-day, if thou wilt hear the voice of God calling thee to repentance to charity, harden not thy heart; but what thou knowest that in thy last moment thou shalt wish done, make haste to do, lest thy last moment be now upon thee.

And let us all, at all times, and in all places, remember, that they who have given food to the hungry, raiment to the naked, and instruction to the ignorant, shall be numbered by the Son of God amongst the blessed of the Father.

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/samuel-johnson/isaiah-587-8/>

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