

## The Relationship Between Charity and Justice

Charity and justice are two aspects of the love we are called to by Jesus. In Mark Ch.12, a scribe asks Jesus: "Which commandment is the first of all?" And Jesus replied that we must first love God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength and the second is to love our neighbor as ourselves.

This love of self and others is manifested in a multitude of different ways, but the goal is the same: to help ourselves and others to thrive as true human beings. And so, as we help ourselves and others to thrive as true human beings, we become one with God's creative purpose for us. In the Gospel of John we find Jesus telling us that He is the "bread of life" and that he came that we might have life "and have it abundantly". Thus, when doing acts of charity and justice we are at one with God's creative purpose for us -- this is our destiny, this is our salvation.

### A Question

While we can agree that the works of charity and justice are certainly an important part of the Christian life, we also know that committing ourselves to these works can be very demanding on our time and resources. Plus, it seems to be a never ending task with no hope of resolution in sight. Can we ever imagine a truly just world and did not Jesus say that the "poor will be always with us"?

Therefore, when we consider what makes up the core of the Christian life we might be tempted to conclude that the central core of the Christian life consists in prayer, Sunday church, bible reading, meditation, etc. and that our focus should be more on the Kingdom of Heaven not on the things of this world.

If we are so tempted, perhaps if we turn in our bibles to Isaiah 58 , we can be reassured that in our dedication to works of justice and charity we are on the right track and that the Lord is with us.

Is this the manner of fasting I wish,  
of keeping a day of penance;  
That a man bow his head like a reed,  
and lie in sackcloth and ashes?

Do you call this a fast,  
a day acceptable to the Lord?  
This, rather, is the fasting that I wish:  
releasing those bound unjustly,  
untying the thongs of the yoke;  
Setting free the oppressed,  
breaking every yoke;  
Sharing your bread with the hungry,  
sheltering the oppressed and the homeless;

Clothing the naked when you see them,  
and not turning your back on your own.

Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,  
and your wound shall quickly be healed;  
Your vindication shall go before you,  
and the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard.  
Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer,  
you shall cry for help, and he will say: Here I am! (Isaiah 58:5-9)

Isaiah speaks here as a mouthpiece of God and he speaks strongly of justice and charity. When he speaks of setting people free from the “yoke” he is speaking of justice and then when he speaks of sharing bread with the hungry, sheltering the homeless, etc., he is speaking of charity.

What Isaiah is saying is that our religious rituals – going to church, reading our bible, mediation – are not ends in themselves. Our religious activities are designed to put us in the presence of God to be transformed, so that we might have that “mind in us” that is in Jesus, as Paul tells us. It is in our attempts to love ourselves and others that we truly meet the Lord .

## **Charity**

Charity can express itself in a wide variety of ways, but let us take a brief look at what we typically call our “works of charity”. We have plenty of opportunities here in Manhattan to be involved in works of charity by donating our time and/or our money. For example, we can help make food available through the Breadbasket and a variety of soup kitchens; emergency aid through the Manhattan Emergency Shelter; long term shelter through the Habitat for Humanity. We can also reach out to others through organizations, like Shepherds Crossing, the Crisis Center, Catholic Charities, various clothing budget shops, etc. Many of you do this now as individuals and through clubs, fraternities, sororities, churches and other organizations. Keep it up. This work is much needed and can be very helpful to those in need.

The words of Isaiah about charity are echoed in the words of Jesus found in Matthew Ch. 25, where Jesus says that when the Son of man comes in all his glory, all the nations will be gathered before him and he will separate the sheep from the goats – the sheep to eternal life and the goats to eternal punishment.

The criteria for separating the sheep from the goats do not include baptism or church attendance, but simply focus on works of charity:

Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom  
prepared for you from the foundation of the world;  
for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty  
and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you

welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me,  
I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you  
came to me.

Then the righteous will answer him, Lord when did we  
see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink?  
And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you  
or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or  
in prison and visit you?

And the King will answer them, Truly, I say to you, as you  
did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.  
(Mt. 25:34-40)

What Jesus is saying is that if you truly want a personal relationship with Him, you can find it in meeting the needs of “the least of my brethren”.

## **Justice**

While these “works of charity” mentioned above are laudable and necessary, we need to evaluate them with extreme caution as we consider the demands of love expressed in our “works of justice”. We can never let our gifts of charity, as necessary and important as they are, exempt us from the great demands imposed by justice. If the goal of Christian love is to help ourselves and others to thrive as true human beings according to God’s creative plan, then we must first consider the demands of justice or our works of charity can become hollow or even contribute to the “sin of the world”.

How is this possible? Consider this quote from Pope Benedict XVI

Works of charity can be a way for the rich to shirk their obligation to work for justice and can be a means of soothing their consciences while preserving their own status and robbing the poor of their rights. Instead of contributing through individual works of charity to maintaining the status quo, we need to build a just social order in which all receive their share of the world’s goods and no longer have to depend on charity.

According to this approach, the demands of justice must be given a logical priority. If it is within our power, that which is due in justice is not to be offered as a gift of charity. For example, if we own a business and we do not pay our employees a living wage, then our charitable gifts to the Breadbasket to feed these same employees are misplaced

In the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, (Art. 23 and 25), the demands of justice are seen as social and economic rights. The document speaks of guaranteeing human rights such as the right to a job, adequate compensation and an adequate standard of living, “including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood,

old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.” This “rights” approach also agrees with our American declaration of the right of every citizen to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

If we agree with this notion of justice and human rights, then perhaps, instead of focusing only on donations to support free health clinics for the uninsured poor, we should seek a workable way to provide universal health care to all citizens. Or instead of simply maintaining large Emergency Shelters or seeking donations for the Habitat for Humanity, perhaps we ought to promote a living wage so that workers could pay their rents and afford child care for their children. Just a thought.

This is not to say that one day we will establish a world where justice reigns and charity is not needed. There will always be people who will need our assistance in their moments of crisis.

Given this fact, then perhaps our “works of charity” might better be regarded necessary, but not as ends in themselves. Perhaps we could consider them as “steps toward justice”, necessary steps as we attempt to move toward a more just society as contained in the idea of the Kingdom of God as preached by Jesus. As with works of charity, working toward justice is no small task. It can demand a great deal from us.

As we mentioned before about the demands of charity on our time and resources, it is also true about the demands of justice. Again, we must be careful to resist the temptation to say that we are good religious people simply because we go to church on Sunday, read our Bible often, go to religious discussion groups and spend time in meditation. The ancient prophets were aware of this temptation and their message was quite clear as we hear from Amos and Micah.

Speaking for the Lord, Amos said:

I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.

Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and cereal offerings, I will not accept them, and the peace offerings of your fatted beasts I will not look upon.

Take away from me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps I will not listen. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream (Amos 5:21-24).

Micah was equally blunt:

With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself  
before God on high?  
Shall I come before him with burnt offerings,  
With calves a year old?  
Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams,  
With ten thousands of rivers of oil?  
Shall I give my first-born for my transgression,  
The fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?  
He has showed you, O man, what is good;  
And what does the Lord require of you  
But to do justice, and to love kindness  
And to walk humbly with your God?

Amos and Micah lived in the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC. This was a time of peace and prosperity in Israel. However, most of the fruits of prosperity were enjoyed only by the upper class. They assumed that simply because they performed the cultic rituals, Yahweh was pleased with them and thus granted them prosperity and peace. They saw no need for social justice.

However, Amos and Micah spoke out against social injustice. The poor had to sell themselves to get out of small debts, the rich falsified the weights and measures and the courts were corrupt. Amos and Micah were not against the cults as such, but in the way they were practiced. They declared that doing the will of Yahweh in the holy place must conform to doing the will of Yahweh in the marketplace.

The essence of a true spirituality is to put ourselves in the presence of God, i.e., going to church on Sunday, reading our Bibles, religious discussion groups, meditation etc., so that we can be transformed by that experience and go on to lead a life dedicated to love of self, others, the world and our God.

### **What Can We Do Now?**

Realistically, what we can do now in responding to the needs for charity and the promotion of social justice in our communities depends largely on our situation in life. If we are students with little or no money and no direct influence on the business or political world, our efforts may be limited to such activities as volunteer work for charitable organizations. There may be opportunities to volunteer time on-site at organizations like The Emergency Shelter or Shepherds Crossing or help at fund-raisers for these and other charitable organizations. There may also be opportunities to help public officeholders or those running for office that support programs of social aid or social justice.

There are also many opportunities to become aware of the needs of the local, state and national communities. These include keeping up with the news, attending lectures or

presentations of individuals or groups trying to meet the needs of the poor or oppressed, visiting local organizations that deal with charity and justice issues on a daily basis.

These ongoing efforts to grow in an awareness of the needs in society can prepare us to respond in other ways when the opportunity arises. These ways could include voting for public programs or officials who are dedicated to meeting the needs of charity and justice; giving money to support these efforts, working for justice in an organization which we may some day own or in which we work.

Once we are “tuned in” to the specific needs for charity and justice in the world around us, many opportunities to respond in some way will arise. And if starting a family is part of our future, our dedication to charity and justice can be passed on to future generations.

**What results can we expect from our commitment to Christian love as expressed in works of charity and works of justice?**

- 1) Can we anticipate a perfect world? A perfect world, the Kingdom of God in its fullness, will no doubt have to wait until the Second Coming. But as Christians we can and must promote the Kingdom of God on earth and perhaps with our help the mustard seed will grow some.
- 2) Given that a perfect world is not around the corner, even so, with our efforts we can be sure in the knowledge that each and every work of charity and every step toward justice will make the world a better place and the Kingdom will grow. Jesus taught us to pray “thy kingdom come, thy will be done *on earth* as it is in heaven”. Heaven is doing just fine, it is earth that we must work on.
- 3) Not only will our efforts change the world around us for the better, it is also true that our dedication to charity and justice will make us better human beings, we will grow and developed according to God’s gracious plan of creation. We are all in the process of becoming – becoming someone. Our loving commitment to charity and justice will put us on the road to becoming the kind of lovers our God calls us to be.