

Lesson 11 13 April 2014

Charity—the More Excellent Way

Lesson Scope: 1 Corinthians 13

Lesson Focus

Charity—of what importance is it? How is its exercise related to the use of spiritual gifts?

Paul interrupted his discourse concerning spiritual gifts (1 Corinthians 12 and 14) to bring to his readers' attention "a more excellent way" (1 Corinthians 13). He showed them that while these gifts can be used to accomplish much good, they are worthless in the absence of charity. In fact, unless charity motivates us, any spiritual effort will bring little benefit to us or others.

Divine love is a fruit of the Spirit, and no law restricts its exercise (Galatians 5:22-23). Love is the fulfilling of the Law (Romans 13:10). The more love rules one's life, the more obedient he will be to God and His Word; consequently, the more useful he will be in the church.

"Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13). Jesus showed such love for us when He died on the cross. His love inspires us to love our brethren.

"The fruit of the Spirit is love." Charity must regulate all functions and relationships within the church of Christ.

To natural men, love means being nice to people who are nice to them. They cannot comprehend the nature of divine love until they come to know God. You may want to begin this study by considering the difference between human love and divine love.

Charity and its expressions toward our brethren spring from God's love dwelling within us. It cannot be manufactured or acquired any other way. We forbear with our brethren and forgive them as God has done with us.

Lesson Aim: To describe the nature of divine love within the body of Christ.

Theme Verse: 1 John 4:7. Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God; and every one that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God.

Lesson Text

The Worth of Charity

1 Corinthians 13:1-3 ¹ 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. ² And though I have *the gift of* prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing. ³ And though I bestow all my goods to feed *the poor*, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing.

The Work of Charity

1 Corinthians 13:4-7 ⁴ Charity suffereth long, *and* is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up, ⁵ Doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil; ⁶ Rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth; ⁷ Beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things.

The Wonder of Charity

1 Corinthians 13:8-13 ⁸ Charity never faileth: but whether *there be* prophecies, they shall fail; whether *there be* tongues, they shall cease; whether *there be* knowledge, it shall vanish away. ⁹ For we know in part, and we prophesy in part. ¹⁰ But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away. ¹¹ When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things. ¹² For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known. ¹³ And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these *is* charity.

Questions for Study

The Worth of Charity

1. How does the writer depict the great worth of charity?
2. What are some indications that charity is our chief motivation?

The Work of Charity

3. In what way does one's opinion of himself affect his expression of divine love?
4. Why does self-control enhance brotherhood relationships?
5. How can we tell the difference between one who is good-natured and friendly and one who possesses true charity?

The Wonder of Charity

6. Why is charity preferable to spiritual gifts?
7. What point was Paul making in verse 11?
8. How can we grow in the expression of charity?

Analyzing the Passage

Charity, the prominent word in this chapter, is translated from the Greek word *agape*. This word is more often translated love in the New Testament. Divine love stems from God's choice to love rather than from man's worthiness.

The first three verses make negative comparisons to emphasize the work of charity, perhaps to make the Corinthians' condition clear to them. The gifts of speaking, understanding, and generosity certainly do prove valuable when coupled with charity.

The character and the practical expression of charity are beautifully portrayed in 1 Corinthians 13:4-7. The good work of charity not only displays the character of the person possessing it but also bestows great benefit on its objects.

Paul concluded this chapter by depicting charity from an eternal vantage point. Presently, prophecy and the need to acquire knowledge seem vitally important due to our incomplete understanding. But in the future, when our understanding is complete, the importance of spiritual gifts will diminish, just as the need for a lantern or flashlight vanishes in the blazing light of the rising sun. Then charity alone will remain to engage our wonder.

Principles and Applications

The Worth of Charity

1. Charity must motivate all service, or the Christian's life is no more than an empty profession (1 Corinthians 13:1-3). Good deeds are useless when they are not motivated by charity. Without charity, church life becomes mechanical. God's love for us while we were yet sinners

inspires us to love regardless of how others respond to us.

2. Charity gives significance to the gifts that are given for the edifying of the body (1 Corinthians 13:2). The ability to understand complex subjects is a great gift. Charity motivates the one who possesses this gift to use it to edify the church. To do otherwise reduces its worth to nothing. Others generally do not care how much we know until they know how much we care.

3. Charity enables a life of consecration and sacrifice (1 Corinthians 13:3). Charity requires an object upon which to bestow itself. When one is others centered, he can find no end of ways to help and nurture others. He, like Christ, considers himself a servant of all. He goes the second mile, giving without expecting something in return.

The Work of Charity

4. Forbearance, kindness, patience, and humility are expressions of charity (1 Corinthians 13:4). Our human impulses drive us to favor ourselves and fail to seek the welfare of others. When charity governs our thoughts and actions, self and its wishes take a lesser place. "Be kindly affectioned one to another with brotherly love; in honour preferring one another" (Romans 12:10). We should be as patient with others as God has been with us.

5. Charity acts in the believer's life to direct his attitudes and actions (1 Corinthians 13:4-7). Attitudes toward self and others form a seedbed from which actions sprout and grow. Charity acts to keep us from becoming provoked when we are treated unfairly or unkindly. It helps us to endure the misunderstandings and the suspicions of others.

6. Charity does not overlook sin (1 Corinthians 13:6). It stands on the side of truth. It does not take pleasure in the wrongdoing of others, nor does it allow a self-righteous sense of satisfaction about oneself. Our words about the wrongdoings of others should show how serious we believe sin is. We should not use such occasions to speak evil of others but to exalt truth and righteousness.

The Wonder of Charity

7. Love is an eternal attribute of God and His people (1 Corinthians 13:8). Love, like God Himself, is eternal. It will continue to be expressed eternally. Its wonder will never cease to amaze us. Our love for

the Lord will never exceed His love for us. Love is an expression of godliness. "By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another" (John 13:35).

8. Charity has a fullness in this life that is not shared by some other aspects of the Christian life (1 Corinthians 13:8-10). When we speak, we do so with incomplete knowledge of the subject. Charity, however, is not limited by a lack of understanding. It can be shown as Christ has demonstrated by His example. "Hereby perceive we the love of God, because he laid down his life for us: and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren" (1 John 3:16).

9. Charity is the expression of a mature Christian (1 Corinthians 13:11). Charity is made perfect when God's love dwells within us. "There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear: because fear hath torment. He that feareth is not made perfect in love" (1 John 4:18). Childish fears flee when a child learns the security of his parents' love. As we become mature Christians, our love is perfected through God's indwelling presence.

10. Charity is the greatest gift given to the believer for the profit of the saints (1 Corinthians 13:13). The other spiritual gifts will eventually cease to be needed. The limited knowledge of childhood will be superseded by the fuller knowledge of adulthood. The work of charity will never fade in the light of something greater. It will stand as an ever abiding reality, outlasting both faith and hope.

Important Teachings

1. Charity must motivate all service, or the Christian's life is no more than an empty profession (1 Corinthians 13:1-3).

2. Charity gives significance to the gifts that are given for the edifying of the body (1 Corinthians 13:2).

3. Charity enables a life of consecration and sacrifice (1 Corinthians 13:3).

4. Forbearance, kindness, patience, and humility are expressions of charity (1 Corinthians 13:4).

5. Charity acts in the believer's life to direct his attitudes and actions (1 Corinthians 13:4-7).

6. Charity does not overlook sin (1 Corinthians 13:6).

7. Love is an eternal attribute of God and His people (1 Corinthians

13:8).

8. Charity has a fullness in this life that is not shared by some other aspects of the Christian life (1 Corinthians 13:8-10).

9. Charity is the expression of a mature Christian (1 Corinthians 13:11).

10. Charity is the greatest gift given to the believer for the profit of the saints (1 Corinthians 13:13).

Answers to Questions

1. How does the writer depict the great worth of charity?

He shows that the net worth of the gifts of the Spirit amounts to nothing when one does not possess charity. Spiritual gifts must be exercised from the motivation of divine love if others are to profit; thus, charity is the essential ingredient for spiritual gifts to be profitable. Without charity, the impressive gifts and abilities people may possess produce nothing of value.

2. What are some indications that charity is our chief motivation?

We serve because we want to, not because of outward compulsion. Our response is spontaneous and genuine, not mechanical or forced. We sincerely seek the good of others, rather than seeking attention and honor for ourselves. We love all the brethren, not just those we appreciate most.

3. In what way does one's opinion of himself affect his expression of divine love?

When one cares most about himself and considers himself superior to others, his actions do not express divine love. His giving is done in order to receive. He seeks to protect and favor himself. When one has the mind of Christ, he does not seek to bolster his reputation. He desires to serve others and to do them good.

4. Why does self-control enhance brotherhood relationships?

One who possesses self-control places others and their needs ahead of his own. Self-control helps us to love our neighbor as ourselves. It moves us to help meet spiritual and material needs. Since our human nature tends toward selfishness, we need God's help to control self so that we can enjoy good brotherhood relationships.

5. How can we tell the difference between one who is good-natured and friendly and one who possesses true charity?

A salesman may act good-natured and friendly because he is trying to

sell something. He uses this method to gain his own ends. True charity is seen in the good works that follow a verbal expression. To express sympathy for the needs of others, saying, "Be ye warmed and filled," without giving them those things that they need reveals a lack of true charity.

True charity is more than pleasant words and a show of friendliness. It stoops to serve in lowly but meaningful ways. It acts to relieve suffering. It lifts burdens and forbears with the failings of others.

6. Why is charity preferable to spiritual gifts?

Its benefits will endure into eternity. Its exercise will never become obsolete. The spiritual gifts the Corinthians valued so highly will fade in significance and become unnecessary when we come into God's presence and see Him face-to-face.

7. What point was Paul making in verse 11?

A child comes to distorted conclusions based on his incomplete knowledge and his narrow view of things. But when he reaches adulthood, he abandons those childish notions upon gaining a fuller knowledge.

Paul was implying that the Corinthians were yet holding childish understandings, which they should have put aside in favor of mature adult expressions of divine love.

8. How can we grow in the expression of charity?

We must allow the Holy Spirit to produce His fruit in us. When we truly value God's love to us, we will be motivated to express it to others. Charity becomes a way of life as we choose to express it every day. We must be willing to lay down selfish ambitions.

Summarizing the Lesson

Charity has its source in God. "Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God; and every one that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God" (1 John 4:7).

Charity is the only logical response to God's love. "Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought also to love one another" (1 John 4:11).

Charity is a choice we make. "We love him, because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19).

Research Guide

1. Read 1 John 4:7-21 to understand our Christian obligation to love our

brethren as God has loved us.

2. With the help of Strong's Concordance, expand your understanding of the use of the Greek word agape by reading some passages where this word is translated love.