

The great Duty of Charity Recommended.

1 Corinthians 13:8, "Charity never faileth."

Nothing is more valuable and commendable, and yet, not one duty is less practiced, than that of charity. We often pretend concern and pity for the misery and distress of our fellow-creatures, but yet we seldom commiserate their condition so much as to relieve them according to our abilities; but unless we assist them with what they may stand in need of, for the body, as well as for the soul, all our wishes are no more than words of no value or regard, and are not to be esteemed or regarded: for when we hear of any deplorable circumstance, in which our fellow-creatures are involved, be they friends or enemies; it is our duty, as Christians, to assist them to the utmost of our power.

Indeed, we are not, my brethren, to hurt ourselves or our families; this is not that charity which is so much recommended by St. Paul; no, but if we are any ways capable of relieving them without injuring either ourselves, or families, then it is our duty to do it; and this never faileth, where it proceeds from a right end, and with a right view.

St. Paul had been showing, in the preceding chapter, that spiritual gifts were divers; that God had disposed of one blessing to one, and another to another; and though there was a diversity of blessings, God did not bestow them to one person, but gave to one a blessing which he denied to another, and gave a blessing, or a gift to the other which might make him as eminent in one way, as the other's gift made him so in another: but though there are these divers spiritual gifts, they are all given for some wise end, even to profit withal, and to that end they are thus diversely bestowed. We are not, on the one hand, to hide those gifts which God has given us: neither are we, on the other, to be so lavish of them, as to spend them upon our lusts and pleasures, to satisfy our sensual appetites, but they are to be used for the glory of God, and the good of immortal souls. After he had particularly illustrated this, he comes to show, that all gifts, however great they may be in themselves, are of no value unless we have charity, as you may see particularly, by considering from the beginning of this chapter.

But before I go any further, I shall inform you what the apostle means by charity; and that it, Love; if there is true love, there will be charity; there will be an endeavor to assist, help, and relieve according to that ability wherewith God has blessed us: and, since this is so much recommended by the apostle, let us see how valuable this charity is, and how commendable in all those who pursue it. I shall,

I. Consider this blessing as relation to the bodies of men.

II. I shall show how much more valuable it is, when relating to the souls of men.

III. Shall show you when your charity is of the right kind.

IV. Why this charity, or the grace of love, never faileth.

V. Shall conclude all, with an exhortation to high and low, rich and poor, one with another, to be found in the constant practice of this valuable and commendable duty.

FIRST, I shall consider this duty, as relating to the bodies of men.

And,

1. O that the rich would consider how praise-worthy this duty is, in helping their fellow-creatures! We were created to be a help to each other; God has made no one so independent as not to need the assistance of another; the richest and most powerful man upon the face of this earth, needs the help and assistance of those who are around him; and though he may be great today, a thousand accidents may make him as low tomorrow; he that is rolling in plenty today, may be in as much scarcity tomorrow. If our rich men would be more charitable to their poor friends and neighbors, it would be a means of recommending them to the savor of others, if Providence should frown upon them; but alas, our great men had much rather spend their money in a playhouse, at a ball, an assembly, or a masquerade, than relieve a poor distressed servant of Jesus Christ. They had rather spend their estates on their hawks and hounds, on their whores, and earthly, sensual, devilish pleasures, than comfort, nourish, or relieve

one of their distressed fellow-creatures. What difference is there between

the king on the throne, and the beggar on the dunghill, when God demands their breaths? There is no difference, my brethren, in the grave, nor will there be any at the day of judgment. You will not be excused because you have had a great estate, a fine house, and lived in all the pleasures that earth could afford you; no, these things will be one means of your condemnation; neither will you be judged according to the largeness of your estate, but according to the use you have made of it.

Now, you may think nothing but of your pleasures and delights, of living in ease and plenty, and never consider how many thousands of your fellow-creatures would rejoice at what you are making waste of, and setting no account by. Let me beseech you, my rich brethren, to consider the poor of the world, and how commendable and praise-worthy it is to relieve those who are distressed. Consider, how pleasing this is to God, how delightful it is to man, and how many prayers you will have put up for your welfare, by those persons whom you relieve; and let this be a consideration to spare a little out of the abundance wherewith God has blessed you, or the relief of his poor. He could have placed you in their low condition, and they in your high state; it is only his good pleasure that has thus made the difference, and shall not this make you remember your distressed fellow-creatures?

Let me beseech you to consider, which will stand you best at the day of judgment, so much money expended at a horse-race, or a cockpit, at a play or masquerade, or so much given for the relief of your fellow-creatures, and for the distressed members of Jesus Christ.

I beseech you, that you would consider how valuable and commendable this duty is: do not be angry at my thus exhorting you to that duty, which is so much recommended by Jesus Christ himself, and by all his apostles: I speak particularly to you, my rich brethren, to entreat you to consider those that are poor in this world, and help them from time to time, as their necessity calls for it. Consider, that there is a curse denounced against the riches of those, who do not thus do good with them; namely, "Go to now you rich men, weep and howl for your miseries that shall come upon you; your riches are corrupted, your garments are moth-eaten, your gold and silver is cankered, and the rust of them shall be a witness against you, and shall eat your flesh, as it were fire; ye have heaped your treasure together for the last day." You see the dreadful woe pronounced against all those who hoard up the abundance of the things of this life, without relieving the distresses of those who are in want thereof: and the apostle James goes on also to speak against those who have acquired estates by fraud, as too many have in these days. "Behold the hire of the laborers, which have reaped down your fields, which is by you kept back by fraud, crieth; and the cries of them who have reaped, are entered into the ears of the Lord God of Sabbaoth. Ye have lived in pleasure on the earth, and been wanton; ye have nourished your hearts, as in the day of slaughter." Thus, if you go on to live after the lust of the flesh, to pamper your bellies, and make them a God, while the poor all around you are starving, God will make these things a witness against you, which shall be as a worm to your souls, and gnaw your consciences to all eternity; therefore, let me once more recommend charity unto the bodies of men, and beseech you to remember what a blessed Lord Jesus Christ has promised unto those who thus love his members, that "as they have done it to the least of his members, they have done it unto him."

I am not now speaking for myself; I am not recommending my little flock in Georgia to you; then you might say, as many wantonly do, that I wanted the money for myself; no, my brethren, I am now recommending the poor of this land to you, your poor neighbors, poor friends, yea, your poor enemies; they are whom I am now speaking for; and when I see so many starving in the streets, and almost naked, my bowels are moved with pity and concern, to consider, that many in whose power it is, to lend their assisting hand, should shut up their bowels of compassion, and will not relieve their fellow-creatures, though in the most deplorable condition for the want thereof.

As I have thus recommended charity particularly to the rich among you; so now I would,

2. SECONDLY, Recommend this to another set of people among us, who, instead of being the most forward in acts of charity, are commonly the most

backward; I mean the clergy of this land.

Good God! How amazing is the consideration, that those, whom God has called out to labor in spiritual things, should be so backward in this duty, as fatal experience teacheth. Our clergy (that is the generality thereof) are only seeking after preferment, running up and down, to obtain one benefice after another; and to heap up an estate, either to spend on the pleasures of life, or to gratify their sensual appetites, while the poor of their flock are forgotten; nay, worse, they are scorned, hated, and disdained.

I am not now, my brethren, speaking of all the clergy; no, blessed be God, there are some among them, who abhor such proceedings, and are willing to relieve the necessitous; but God knows, these are but very few, while many take no thought of the poor among them.

They can visit the rich and the great, but the poor they cannot bear in their sight; they are forgetful, willfully forgetful of the poor members of Jesus Christ.

They have gone out of the old paths, and turned into a new polite way, but which is not warranted in the word of God: they are sunk into a fine way of acting; but as fine as it is, it was not the practice of the apostles, or of the Christians in any age of the church: for they visited and relieved the poor among them; but how rare is this among us, how seldom do we find charity in a clergyman?

It is with grief I speak these things, but woeful experience is a witness to the truth thereof: and if all the clergy of this land were here, I would tell them boldly, that they did not keep in the ways of charity, but were remiss in their duty; instead of "selling all and giving to the poor," they will not sell any thing, nor give at all to the poor.

3. THIRDLY, I would exhort you who are poor, to be charitable to one another.

Though you may not have money, or the things of this life, to bestow upon one another; yet you may assist them, by comforting, and advising them not to be discouraged though they are low in the world; or in sickness you may help them according as you have time or ability: do not be unkind to one another: do not grieve, or vex, or be angry with each other; for this is giving the world an advantage over you.

And if God stirs up any to relieve you, do not make an ill use of what his providence, by the hands of some Christian, hath bestowed upon you: be always humble and wait on God; do not murmur or repine, if you see any relieved and you are not; still wait on the Lord, and help one another, according to your abilities, from time to time.

Having showed you how valuable this is to the bodies of men, I now proceed,

SECONDLY, To show you how much more valuable this charity is, when it extends to the souls of men.

And is not the soul more valuable than the body? It would be of no advantage, but an infinite disadvantage, to obtain all the world, if we were to lose our souls. The soul is of infinite value, and of infinite concern, and, therefore, we should extend our charity whenever we see it needful, and likewise should reprove, rebuke, and exhort with all godliness and love.

We should, my dear brethren, use all means and opportunities for the salvation of our own souls, and of the souls of others. We may have a great deal of charity and concern for the bodies of our fellow-creatures, when we have no thought, or concern, for their immortal souls: But O how sad is it, to have thought for a mortal, but not for the immortal part; to have charity for the body of our fellow-creatures, while we have no concern for their immortal souls; it may be, we help them to ruin them, but have no concern in the saving of them.

You may love to spend a merry evening, to go to a play, or a horse-race, with them; but on the other hand, you cannot bear the thoughts of going to a sermon, or a religious society, with them; no, you would sing the songs of the drunkard, but you will not sing hymns, with them; this is not polite enough, this is unbecoming a gentleman of taste, unfashionable, and only practiced among a parcel of enthusiasts and madmen.

Thus, you will be so uncharitable as to join hand in hand with those who are hastening to their own damnation, while you will not be so charitable as to assist them in being brought from darkness to light, and

from the power of Satan unto God. But this, my dear brethren, is the greatest charity, as can be, to save a soul from death: this is of far greater advantage, than relieving the body of a fellow-creature: for the most miserable object as could be, death would deliver it from all. But death, to those who are not born again, would be so far from being a release from all misery, that it would be an inlet to all torment, and that to all eternity. Therefore, we should assist, as much as possible, to keep a soul from falling into the hands of Satan: for he is the grand enemy of souls. How should this excite you to watch over your own and others souls? For unless you are earnest with God, Satan will be too hard for you. Surely, it is the greatest charity to watch over one another's words and actions, that we may forewarn each other when danger is nigh, or when the enemy of souls approaches.

And if you have once known the value of your own souls, and know what it is to be snatched as brands out of the burning fire, you will be solicitous that others may be brought out of the same state. It is not the leading of a moral life, being honest, and paying every man his just due; this is not a proof of your being in a state of grace, or of being born again, and renewed in the spirit of your minds: No, you may die honest, just, charitable, and yet not be in a state of salvation.

It is not the preaching of that morality, which most of our pulpits now bring forth, that is sufficient to bring you from sin unto God. I saw you willing to learn, and yet were ignorant of the necessity of being born again, regenerated, of having all old things done away, and all things becoming new in your souls: I could not bear, my brethren, to see you in the highway to destruction, and none to bring you back. It was love to your souls, it was a desire to see Christ formed in you, which brought me into the fields, the highways, and hedges, to preach unto you Jesus, a crucified Jesus as dying for you. It was charity, indeed it was charity to your souls, which has exposed me to the present ill treatment of my letter-learned brethren.

Therefore, let me advise you to be charitable to the souls of one another; that is, by advising them with all love and tenderness, to follow after Christ, and the things which belong to their immortal peace, before they be forever hid from their eyes.

I now proceed, in the

THIRD place, to show when your charity is of the right kind.

And here, my brethren, I shall show, FIRST, When it is not; and, SECONDLY, When it is of the right kind.

1. FIRST, Your charity is not of the right kind, when it proceeds from worldly views or ends.

If it is to be seen of men, to receive any advantage from them, to be esteemed, or to gain a reputation in the world; or if you have any pride in it, and expect to reap benefit from God merely for it; if all, or each of these is the end of your charity, then it is all in vain; your charity does not proceed from a right end, but you are hereby deceiving your own souls.

If you give an alms purely to be observed by man, or as expecting favor from God, merely on the account thereof, then you have not the glory of God, or the benefit of your fellow-creatures at heart, but merely yourself: this, this is not charity. Nor,

SECONDLY, Is that true charity, when we give any thing to our fellow-creatures purely to indulge them in vice: this is so far from being charity, that it is a sin, both against God, and against our fellow-creatures. And yet, this is a common, as it is sinful, to carry our friends, under a specious pretense of charity, to one or the other entertainment, with no other view, but to make them guilty of excess.

Hereby you are guilty of a double sin: we are not to sin ourselves, much less should we endeavor to make another sin likewise. But,

THIRDLY, Our charity comes from a right end, when it proceeds from love to God, and for the welfare both of the body and soul of our fellow-creatures.

When this is the sole end of relieving our distressed fellow-creatures, then our charity comes from a right end, and we may expect to

reap advantage by it: this is the charity which is pleasing to God. God is

well pleased, when all our actions proceed from love, love to himself, and love to immortal souls.

Consider, my dear brethren, that it was love for souls, that brought

the blessed Jesus among the bosom of his Father; that made him, who was equal in power and glory, to come and take upon him our nature; that caused the Lord of life to die the painful, ignominious, and accursed death of the cross. It was love to immortal souls, that brought this blessed Jesus among us. And O that we might hence consider how great the value of souls was and is: it was that which made Jesus to bleed, pant, and die. And surely souls must be of infinite worth, which made the Lamb of God to die so shameful a death.

And shall not this make you have a true value for souls? It is of the greatest worth: and this, this is the greatest charity, when it comes from love to God, and from love to souls. This will be a charity, the satisfaction of which will last to all eternity. O that this may make you have so much regard for the value of souls, as not to neglect all opportunities for the doing of them good: here is something worth having charity for, because they remain to all eternity. Therefore, let me earnestly beseech you both to consider the worth of immortal souls, and let your charity extend to them, that by your advice and admonition, you may be an instrument, in the hands of God, in bringing souls to the Lord Jesus.

I am in the next place to consider,

FOURTHLY, Why this charity, or grace of love never faileth.

And it never faileth in respect of its proceeding from an unchangeable God. We are not to understand, that our charity is always the same: No, there may, and frequently are, ebbs and flowings; but still it never totally faileth: No, the grace of love remaineth for ever. There is, and will be, a charity to all who have erred and run astray from God. We cannot be easy to see souls in the highway to destruction, and not use our utmost endeavor to bring them back from sin, and show them the dreadful consequence of running into evil. Christians cannot bear to see those souls for whom Christ died, perish for want of knowledge: and if they see any of the bodies of their fellow-creatures in want, they will do the utmost in their power to relieve them.

Charity will never fail, among those who have a true love to the Lord Jesus, and know the value of souls: they will be charitable to those who are in distress. And thus you see, that true charity, if it proceeds from a right end, never faileth.

I now proceed, my brethren, in the

LAST place, to exhort all of you, high and low, rich and poor, one with another, to practice this valuable and commendable duty of charity.

It is not rolling in your coaches, taking your pleasure, and not considering the miseries of your fellow-creatures, that is commendable or praise-worthy; but the relieving your distressed poor fellow-creatures, is valuable and praise-worthy wherever it is found. But alas! how very few of our gay and polite gentlemen consider their poor friends; rather they despise, and do not regard them. They can indulge themselves in the follies of life, and had much rather spend their estates in lusts and pleasures, while the poor all round them are not thought worthy to be set with the dogs of their flock. If you have an abundance of the things of this world, then you are esteemed as companions for the polite and gay in life; but if you are poor, then you must not expect to find any favor, but be hated, or not thought fit for company or conversation: and if you have an abundance of the things of this life, and do not want any assistance, then you have many ready to help you. My dear brethren, I do not doubt but your own experience is a proof of my assertions; as also, that if any come into distress, then those, who promised to give relief, quite forget what they promise, and will despise, because Providence has frowned. But this is not acting like those who are bound for the heavenly Jerusalem; thus our hearts and our actions give our lips the lie: for if we profess the name of Christ, and do not depart from all iniquity, we are not those, who are worthy of being esteemed Christians indeed.

For, if we have not charity, we are not Christians: charity is the great duty of Christians: and where is our Christianity, if we want charity? Therefore, let me beseech you to exercise charity to your

distressed fellow-creatures. Indeed, my dear brethren, this is truly

commendable, truly valuable; and therefore, I beseech you, in the bowels of tender mercy to Christ, to consider his poor distressed members; exercise, exercise, I beseech you, this charity: if you have no compassion, you are not true disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ. I humbly beg you to consider

those who want relief, and are really destitute, and relieve them according to your abilities. Consider, that the more favorable Providence has been to you, it should make you the more earnest and solicitous to relieve those whom you may find in distress: it is of the utmost consequence, what is well pleasing to your fellow-creatures, and doing your duty to God.

When you are called from hence, then all riches and grandeur will be over; the grave will make no distinction; great estates will be of no signification in the other world; and if you have made a bad use of the talent which God hath put into your hands, it will be only an aggravation of your condemnation at the great day of account, when God shall come to demand your souls, and to call you to an account, for the use to which you have put the abundance of the things of this life.

To conclude, let me once more beseech each of you to act according to the circumstances of life, which God, in his rich and free mercy, has given you.

If you were sensible of the great consequences which would attend your acting in this charitable manner, and considered it as a proof of your love to God, the loving his members; you could not be uncharitable in your tempers, nor fail to relieve any of your distressed fellow creatures.

Consider how easy it is for many of you, by putting your mites together, to help one who is in distress; and how can you tell, but that the little you give, may be the means of bringing one from distress into flourishing circumstances; and then, if there is a true spirit of a Christian in them, they can never be sufficiently thankful to God the author, and to you as the instrument, in being so great a friend to them in their melancholy circumstances: consider also, once more, how much better your account will be at the day of judgment, and what peace of conscience you will enjoy. How satisfactory must be the thought of having relieved the widow and the fatherless? This is recommended by the Lord Jesus Christ, and has been practiced in all ages of the church: and therefore, my brethren, be ye now found in the practice of this duty.

I have been the larger upon this, because our enemies say we deny all moral actions; but, blessed be God, they speak against us without cause: we highly value them; but we say, that faith in Christ, the love of God, and being born again, are of infinite more worth; but you cannot be true Christians without having charity to your fellow-creatures, be they friends or enemies, if in distress. And, therefore, exert yourselves in this duty, as is commanded by the blessed Jesus: and if you have true charity, you shall live and reign with him for ever.

Now to God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost, be all honor, power, glory, might, majesty, and dominion, both now and for evermore. Amen.