

Week 10: Charity

“A bone to the dog is not charity. Charity is the bone shared with the dog, when you are just as hungry as the dog.” (Jack London)

When asked what the first commandment of all was, Jesus promptly responded by saying that one should love the Lord with all his being. He then appended a second command to the first and prefaced it by saying that it is like the first (as in, similar in importance): “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” (see Matthew 22:35-40)

If there was any doubt as to the weight of the second command in comparison to that of the first, Jesus cleared it up by stating that, “On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets.” (Matthew 22:40, NASB)

In a similar situation, recorded in Luke 10, Jesus was asked by an individual how he might obtain eternal life. Jesus responded by citing the same two commands. (see Luke 10:25-28)

The message is clear: Those who are to be called by Christ’s name must not only love their Creator with complete dedication, but they must view their neighbor as worthy of the care and concern usually only reserved for oneself.

Charity (or generosity) is not a peripheral command. It is in fact at the very heart of what it means to be a Christian. One cannot be an uncharitable Christian any more than up can be down or wet can be dry. Charity is inherent in Christianity. No matter what the culture around us screams, Jesus quietly reminds us that, “It is more blessed to give than to receive.” (Acts 20:35)

(As a note, this lesson will focus on charity and generosity in the context of money/material possessions, as this is the counterpart lesson to the one on greed. Obviously, though, Christian charity/generosity extends far beyond just our stewardship of financial/material resources.)

The Difference Between Greed and Charity

At its root, greed stems from a person's misinterpretation of himself.

While a charitable person recognizes that he is merely a means to an end (insofar as financial/material resources go), a greedy person considers himself an end.

While a charitable person understands that he is simply a funnel through which financial and material resources can be spread to those in greater need, a greedy person misinterprets himself as a collection tank, where resources are to be pooled indefinitely.

A charitable person is like a body of water that has streams flowing both into and out of it. A greedy person, though, is like the Salt Sea, which water only flows into. While the greedy person deludes himself into thinking that a constant inflowing stream of resources (with no balancing outflow) produces a much more vibrant existence, the charitable person knows that the opposite is true. It's no coincidence that the Salt Sea is also known as the Dead Sea. Life cannot be sustained when resources only flow inward.

The Hang-Ups

Why then do we struggle to be as charitable as we ought to be?
Here are three reasons:

1. We think what we have belongs to us. This goes back to the concept of an end versus a means to an end. We often forget that we are not owners, we are stewards. Owners are the end. Stewards are a means to an end. God has surely blessed us with much, but He's not blessed us with things that are ours. He's entrusted to us things that are His. From the outset, a clearheaded steward understands that what is put in front of him is to be used for the purposes dictated by the owner. The steward is the instrument by which the owner's purposes are carried out. Nothing more, nothing less.

2. We have a scarcity mentality. As opposed to an abundance mentality. One says that there's only enough for some. The other says that there's enough for Everyone

When we view material resources as limited quantities (which is exactly the way advertisers want us to view them), we consider the attempt to obtain them a

competition: “I’ve got to get them before someone else does, or there won’t be any left for me.” There is a winner and a loser: He who obtains wins, and he who doesn’t loses.

When we view the reservoir of material resources as able to provide for everyone, we no longer view the obtaining of them as a competition. God clearly states in Proverbs 28:27, “He who gives to the poor will never Want ...” (NASB).

3. We equate possession with personal worth.

In other words, he who has the most toys is worth the most as a person.

We attach social status, credibility, and influence to wealth.

Thus, we try to keep up with...or outdo...the Joneses.

Jesus warned: “Beware, and be on your guard against every form of greed; for not even when one has an abundance does his life consist of his possessions.” (Luke 12:15, NASB)

If it did, the Son of God would have had very little personal worth.

Biblical Principles Regarding Charity

So what does Scripture have to say about financial/material charity?

Consider these three principles as a starter list:

1. True charity is done out of altruism, not selfishness.

There are many ways to pervert charity and turn it into an utterly selfish act:

One is to do it for notoriety. Ananias and Sapphira stand as sobering examples of this (Acts 5:1-11). Not coincidentally, God used their actions to make it clear that their motives were unacceptable. (Consider also Matthew 6:1-4)

Another way is to do it for personal material gain. We can use charity as a twisted outlet for our greed. We give to get in return. After all, God did say “He who gives to the poor will never want...” (Proverbs 28:27, NASB) and “He who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.” (2 Corinthians 9:6; See also Proverbs 11:24-25)

Yet, we must remember the principle that Emanuel Swedenborg eluded to when he said, “True charity is the desire to be useful to others with no thought of recompense.” The same sentiment was expressed with a bit more candor by Don Bennett: “Real charity doesn’t care if it’s tax-deductible or not.”

Biblical, godly charity is done purely for the benefit of the receiver. It is altruistic.

2. True charity involves sacrifice.

If you doubt this, just remember the story of the widow and her two mites, as well as Jesus' extolling of her action. (Mark 12:41-44; Luke 21:1-4)

Noted at the beginning of the lesson, Jack London once said, "A bone to the dog is not charity. Charity is the bone shared with the dog, when you are just as hungry as the dog."

Khalil Gibran echoed London's sentiment when he said, "Generosity is not giving me that which I need that you do, but it is giving me that which you need more than I do."

3. True charity is equivalent to storing up eternal treasure.

Being willing to trade the wealth of this life for the betterment of those around us has eternal ramifications.

God has promised eternal treasure to those who are willing to sacrifice their own comforts in this life for the good of others:

"Instruct them [those who are rich in this present age] to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is life indeed." (1 Timothy 6:18-19, NASB)

The Moral To The Story

God gives us material blessings for the purpose of sharing with others, not to hoard to ourselves. "...Let him labor, working with his hands what is good, that he may have something to give to him who has need." (Ephesians 4:28, NKJV) "...you will be enriched in everything for all liberality..." (2 Corinthians 9:11, NASB) "Freely you received, freely give." (Matthew 10:8, NASB)

Questions for Thought and Discussion

1. Cite some Biblical examples of charity.
2. This lessons argues that we are stewards of material possessions and not owners outright. Give Scriptures to affirm this claim.
3. Jesus told the rich young ruler that to be complete, he needed to sell all of his possessions and give to the poor. Must we do the same? Would there ever be a circumstance where we would need to do that? If so, what would that circumstance be?
4. In order from highest priority to lowest, list the considerations a Christian must weigh as he/she decides how to spend a sum of money.
5. Read the attached letter from Warren Buffett. What is your reaction to it? Does this constitute Biblical charity? What other thoughts come to your mind as you read this letter?