

The First of Charity

A sermon by Rev. Jeff Smith

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What do you think of when you think of love, or charity? I mean HOW do you love somebody? How do you show charity? Take a few seconds to think of some of the ways you have shown love to someone recently?

We could make quite a list, couldn't we? A million different chores around the house, hugs, listening, kind words, take-them-a-meal, saying hello, comforting a neighbor in need. And, why wouldn't you think of things like these ... when we think about expressing love, we think about the good actions or even the kind thoughts that we might have toward another individual. And, by the way, the charitable deeds that help another person get to heaven ... isn't that the point of love? Isn't that the most important and thus the first thing of charity?

See, when we think of charity and love, we'll generally go to the positive, caring, outward expressions of goodness that we do for others. And don't get me wrong, these are good acts, and good acts are good acts because they are good for other people—helping them through this life and, God willing, toward heaven in the next life. But love and charity are not defined merely by outward actions. True love and true charity are defined by our spiritual intentions. We are looking at love and charity as they relate to the subject ... the do-er ... you who are listening to and/or reading this message.

Today, we recited together the 10 Commandments. In that text, it says what not to do 10 times. On the internet and in some spiritual growth books you can find a positive version of the 10 Commandments. So, instead of “don't take the Lord's name in vain”, you may find “honor the name of God”, or instead of “don't murder”, you may find “respect life”. I do have an appreciation for the positive 10 Commandments because they can be helpful for finding ways to support others or strengthening our relationship with God. On the other hand, though, the Lord very intentionally phrased the Commandments in the form of thou-shalt-not for a reason.

In our brief reading from Isaiah, it says: “Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean; Put away the evil of your doings from before My eyes. Cease to do evil, Learn to do good.” You know, early in Math classes, students learn about “order of operations”. This means that, within a mathematical sentence, certain operations must be done before others—they are given precedence. As a simple example, in a basic math problem like this $1 + 2 \times 3$, the multiplication must come first, and then the addition because that is the order of operations. Disregarding the order of operations will result in the wrong answer.

The Lord also believes in order of operations. Stories, actions, and details in the Lord's Word were written in their order for Divinely specific reasons. In the quoted words from Isaiah, we are first commanded to wash, clean, and cease to do evil, and finally, after all of that, comes the goodness. Order of operations matters. In New Church teachings, the very first words in a book called *Charity* begins with these words: “The first of charity is to look to the Lord and shun evils because they

are sins; this is done by repentance.” If we really want to be charitable, and if we really want to be loving, the Lord instructs us that setting aside our selfishness and reordering our priorities so that people are more important to us than the things of this world—that is the first step to becoming a loving and charitable person.

And this bears out in our reading from Matthew. Jesus provides the Jews who were listening to Him with an order of operations. He said, “If you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.” On the outside, Jesus’s words are amazing in that they make this connection between our relationship with the Lord and our relationship with each other—just as He does with the two great commandments—if you think you can have a good relationship with the Lord but it’s ok to have a crummy relationship with your neighbor, you are very much mistaken. You see, our relationships with each other are the proving ground for our relationship with the Lord.

But we can also go a little bit deeper with these words that were spoken by Jesus. In the work *Arcana Coelestia*, Emanuel Swedenborg writes this about the deeper meaning: “gifts offered to the Lord [in this story, denote] testifications of such things as are offered by the heart, which are those of faith and of charity; being ‘reconciled to a brother’ denotes charity toward the neighbor” (9293.2). The gifts we bring to the Lord every day of our lives are the intentions of our heart. But the Lord is asking us to really check those intentions. If we think we are bringing goodness and love and sweet-smelling offerings to Jehovah, He instructs us to pause. Before we are ready to declare how much love we have in our hearts, how are things with our neighbors?

The words “be reconciled to your brother” simply mean to reunite or come together again. This is nice. But the word reconcile was translated from the Greek word *diallasso*, which bears the meaning “totally change”. Now that’s more like it. Does your brother, your sister, or your neighbor have something against you? And how about you? Do you have something against your brother, sister, or neighbor? There are some disagreements that come up in our relationships that require minor changes to our charity—minor adjustments to our spiritual attitudes. There are others, though, that might require *diallasso* ... a total change. Well, whether minor or total, these changes are totally necessary.

I find one of the most life-changing aspects of New Church theology is the mandate that one’s life needs to change. A heaven-bound life is not merely a matter of sacraments and confessions, neither is it a simply a matter of a heartfelt declaration of faith. True spirituality is a matter of changing our hearts that only the Lord can do, and only when we invite Him in to do it.

It can be really hard to see the things in ourselves that need to change—not so hard to see them in other people, right? Think of it like our bodies, it’s actually kind of hard to get a good view of your own body, but it’s really easy to see other people’s bodies. It’s similar to how we see problems – it’s easier to see them in other people. You know what helps us look at ourselves? A mirror. And it just so happens that we have a spiritual mirror – it’s our thoughts and feelings. You know how a mirror image of yourself isn’t yourself, but it helps you see a smudge on your face? Your thoughts

and feelings function in a very similar way—they aren't you, but they help you see the smudge on your spirit.

When we notice unpleasant feelings like anger, impatience, or worry that result from a conversation or some event ... or, I don't know, somebody else's political view ... those unpleasant feelings aren't from heaven. Or maybe you "know somebody" who has had thoughts like the following: "Why should I be the one to change if it's their fault? ... And why should I give in when I know I'm right?" Aren't these thoughts just so ... self-righteous? I invite you to take time to reflect on your thoughts and feelings that result from the countless events of the day. Do you get upset at yourself for mistakes? Do you get bothered by how a minister preaches? Do you lose patience with people around you, or just one specific person? Do you raise your voice at loved ones or others? The Lord gave us all our own personal mirror so that, instead of focusing on the problems of people around us, we might pay some mind to our own condition.

But pause here for one second. I mean, if we are really focused on loving people, and we love doing pay it forward, and by the way, I have sacrificed so much, and look how patient I've been, and I go to church ... I mean, I know I'm a good person. It's probably ok that I'm not really, exactly, totally, actively working on my temper, or on desirous thoughts I shouldn't be having. I mean, I don't really have time to work on my own bad habits because I'm so busy being a good person. And anyway, this temper, it's just the way I am.

Well, that really isn't how it works. It's not like our good habits and bad habits are placed in a quantitative balance, and as long as you have more good ... no. Good actions do not get us off the hook for sins, evils, selfishness, bad spiritual habits that we actively excuse and permit. Good actions are not truly good, religiousness is not religious, and wisdom is not wise if we are not making some effort to clean house. You cannot serve two masters, saying that your good is good and your sins are of no consequence, thus making it good. You cannot be both hot and cold, because the lukewarm will be spit out.

I would like to leave you with just a couple of closing thoughts. First, use your mirror. When you notice a smudge on your spiritual face, do something about it. Even if it's "their fault", and even if you are "right", unpleasant thoughts and feelings may indicate a need for total change. Something my wife and I sometimes do, is when one person makes a mistake, it is pretty much always an opportunity for both of us to talk about something we can work on. The "innocent" party, for example, could work on not getting upset, or not losing patience, or could ask, "How can I help you work through this?"

Totally changing can be a scary thought—no longer being the self that we want to be. But that's actually the point – change to be the self that the Lord wants you to be.

And finally, ceasing to do evil and shunning evils as sins are indeed the first of charity. But that doesn't mean you should stop loving people until all your sins are removed. Keep on loving people, and for God's sake, please keep on being nice. As you work with the Lord to shun those evils, your acts of love eventually will become truly loving.

Readings:

Mt 5:23-24. If you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.

Isaiah 1:16-17. "Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean; Put away the evil of your doings from before My eyes. Cease to do evil, Learn to do good.

Charity 1. The first of charity is to look to the Lord and shun evils because they are sins, this is done by repentance.

Doctrine of Life 23. If a person wills and does goods before they shun evils as sins, the goods are not good. If a person thinks and speaks pious things while not shunning evils as sins, the pious things are not pious. If a person knows and is wise in many things, and does not shun evils as sins, they are nevertheless not wise.

True Christian Religion 535.2. [Some believe] that they cannot be doing evil because they are doing good, or rather, that the good actions cover up the evil ones. But, my friend, the starting-point of charity is to shun evils. This is what is taught by the Word, the Ten Commandments, baptism, the Holy Supper, even by one's reason. For how can anyone escape evils and get rid of them without some self-inspection? How can good become good, unless it is inwardly made pure? I am well aware that all religious people, as well as those with a sound faculty of reason, will nod in assent when they read this, and see it as a genuine truth - yet still there will be few who actually do it.