

The Effect of Charity

by the Rev. Walter E. Orthwein

And the Lord said, "To what then shall I liken the men of this generation, and what are they like? ...For John the Baptist came neither eating bread nor drinking wine, and you say, 'He has a demon.' The Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, 'Look, a glutton and a winebibber, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!'"

(Luke 7:31,33-34)

If someone hates you and wishes you ill, you can't win with that person. He'll manage to put a bad interpretation on whatever you say or do. This was true with the Lord in the sight of the Pharisees. They had condemned John the Baptist for living a spartan life, neither eating bread nor drinking wine. "He must be possessed," they said. But when the Lord came, eating and drinking and mixing with the crowd, they scorned Him also. He offended their sensibilities. In their eyes, He was a glutton, a winebibber, an associate of riff-raff. If someone thinks ill of you and wants to slander you, there isn't much you can do to avoid it. He will find some ammunition.

Consider what we are taught about the influence of love. "All love," the Heavenly Doctrines say, "possesses in itself a force of attraction" (*Arcana Coelestia* 8604: 3). This is especially true of the Lord's love, which is constantly exerting an upward influence upon people, to elevate them into conjunction with Himself. "The Lord wills to save everyone, and to draw them with a strong force to heaven, that is, to Himself" (*Arcana Coelestia* 1038). As gravity ceaselessly pulls material objects down to the earth, so the Lord's Divine love works ceaselessly to draw the spirits of people upward toward heaven.

And all love has this attracting influence. Every love—good or evil—is like a magnet which draws those things which agree with it to itself. Our view of the world, of other people, of the Lord Himself, depends upon the state of our will, what loves are active in us. One person sees beauty, courage, friendship; another sees ugliness, wickedness, enemies. Yet both are looking at the same world. It is the things which their loves draw out of it that differ.

We all know that as our states change, we see the world differently. At one time life seems bleak and unpromising, and people seem cold and uncaring; while in a different state of mind, life seems delightful and rich, and people are warm and friendly. The difference is not so much in the things or people around us, nor even in our *understanding* of them, but primarily in the *will or love* which colors what our understanding sees. It is love that directs and focuses our minds, and seeks truths or falsities that will confirm and agree with it.

To a considerable degree what we see around us depends upon what is in us. The same thing is true in regard to human relationships. Our reading from the New Testament (Luke 7:31-50) is a case in point. The Pharisees considered the Lord a disorderly and harmful person, while the woman who had sinned and repented saw Him as the very embodiment of good, and washed His feet with her tears. The difference lay in what was within the hearts and minds of the Pharisees

and the woman. In the one case, pride, love of dominion, and the attendant hatred and contempt for others, colored the Pharisees' understanding; in the other case, humility, repentance, and a love of being forgiven, enabled the woman to recognize the Lord as good.

As it says in the Psalm: "With the merciful, You will show Yourself merciful; with a blameless man, You will show Yourself blameless; with the pure, You will show yourself pure; and with the crooked, You will show yourself perverse. For You will save the humble people, but will bring down haughty looks" (Psalm 18:25-27). And as the Lord said in the Sermon on the Mount: "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God" (Matthew 5:8).

The essence of charity is to wish well to others, and to think well of them. Love of the neighbor causes one to see the good in the neighbor, and to excuse his errors. Love of self and the love of dominating, on the other hand, causes one to have contempt for others, to despise them, and to concentrate only on their faults. This love wants to examine everyone, judging and condemning.

The Heavenly Doctrines speak very beautifully of the charity of the angels, and of how they see others. For example, we read:

Those who are in the faith of charity observe what is good, and if they see anything evil and false, they excuse it, and if they can, try to amend it in him.... Where there is no charity, there is the love of self, and therefore hatred against all who do not favor self. Consequently such persons see in the neighbor only what is evil, and if they see anything good, they either perceive it as nothing, or put a bad interpretation upon it. It is just the other way with those who are in charity.

By this difference these two kinds of people are distinguished from one another, especially when they come into the other life; for then, with those who are in no charity, the feeling of hatred shines forth from every single thing; they desire to examine every one, and even to judge him; nor do they desire anything more than to find out what is evil, constantly cherishing the disposition to condemn, punish, and torment.

But those who are in charity scarcely see the evil of another, but observe all his goods and truths, and put a good interpretation on what is evil and false. Such are all the angels, which they have from the Lord, who bends all evil into good.

(Arcana Coelestia 1079)

A charitable person is not blind to evil and falsity; in fact, because he is in good and truth, he has a keener perception of what is evil and false than someone who is not charitable. And, of course, it is an often repeated principle of the Heavenly Doctrines that charity must be exercised intelligently and prudently, with discrimination, lest evil be encouraged and rewarded and thus harm be done to the good.

But a charitable person does not look for evil; he does not seek opportunities to find fault and condemn; and he gives the benefit of the doubt when errors are committed. He is willing to say:

“That was a mistake,” or “He didn’t mean it the way it sounded,” or “There must be some reason for that action of which I am not aware.”

A charitable person isn’t waiting to pounce upon the first appearance of something evil or false—or just plain stupid—in order to confirm his bad opinion of another and condemn him. Instead, he tries to discern the true character of the other person and see the good which is in him from the Lord. Rather than noting the other’s failures, the charitable person tries to see his *use*, and help him to realize his potential.

We have all had the experience of being around certain people who seem to bring out the best in us; whose confidence in us makes us feel confident; whose sympathetic understanding frees us to act freely, rather than have to guard every word and act. This is the kind of sphere that goes forth from the angels, and the Heavenly Doctrines describe how, in the presence of such a sphere, people who had shown little evidence of spiritual life on earth were softened, came alive, and blossomed. (See *Arcana Coelestia* 3647, *Heaven and Hell* 238). The angels’ loving, understanding, forgiving sphere—the very charity in their voices—breaks down the barriers, the “defense mechanisms,” of the hard, fearful, self-conscious spirit, and helps him to bring out the best within himself. Such is the power of charity to give life.

This is the ideal of charity that we also must seek. Charity is not something outside of a person, some external act that one does. Such an act may be an *expression* of charity, but it is not charity itself. Essential charity is a love into which a person comes, or into which he is led by the Lord. Thus the Heavenly Doctrines speak of being *in* charity. It is a way of life, a way of *being*. It is willing well to others.

The way to come into this love is to shun its opposites—especially the love of dominion and the contempt for others which it produces. “To love the neighbor as oneself is not to despise him in comparison with self” (*True Christian Religion* 411). There is no way we can become charitable in an instant; no love is at our command. But we can remove obstacles to charity in our actions and in the conscious parts of our minds which are under our control, so that love of the neighbor can flow in from the Lord. We can refuse to speak or act from contempt for another.

It is for the sake of our own happiness that the Lord wills us to come into a state of charity. “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy” (Matthew 5:7). It is not that the Lord punishes those who are unmerciful, but that they bring punishment and unhappiness upon themselves by removing themselves from the sphere of the Lord’s mercy. Those who reject Divine good come under the law of truth alone, and truth condemns a person, while the Lord’s mercy saves. We read:

When a person separates himself from good he casts himself into the rule of the laws of order that are of truth separated from good, which are such that they condemn; for all truth condemns a person and casts him down into hell, whereas the Lord from good, that is, from mercy, saves him, and lifts him up into heaven. From this we see that it is a person himself who condemns himself.

(*Arcana Coelestia* 2447; see also 7273:2)

The reason why this is so is that no one merits heaven. The Divine order of creation is perfect, and no human being is perfect. Left to ourselves, we would all go into hell. No one can stand before truth alone. Who among us does not need to say, as it is written in the Psalms: “Do not remember the sins of my youth,” and, “If You, Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand?” (Psalms 25:7 and 130:3). It is only the power of Divine love that removes us from evil, that saves us from the condemnation which could justly be meted out to us.

No one is perfect, and we have to be willing to give one another a chance to realize our own errors and to repent of them. We all judge ourselves; we need not judge one another.

A person who rejects mercy and forgiveness actually punishes himself, even during his life on this earth. The reason is that, in a very real sense, we make our own heaven or hell out of life in this world. Someone who seeks evil and falsity in others, in order to condemn them, will find it. He will not only find unpleasant things which are already there, which are already active, but his love of dominion will actually attract new evils and falsities, calling them forth, bringing out the worst in other people.

But, on the other hand, a person who is charitable—who looks for the good, who gives the benefit of the doubt, who refrains from speaking an unkind word—will find the good he seeks in others. Such a person also not only finds what is already there, but his sphere of charity will bring out the best in others, and he will find great delights in his association with his fellow human beings. In this way such a person creates his own heaven.

“Therefore be merciful, just as your Father also is merciful. Judge not, and you shall not be judged. Condemn not, and you shall not be condemned. Forgive, and you shall be forgiven” (Luke 6:36-37).

Amen.

Lessons: Psalm 18:16-27; Luke 7:31-50; *Arcana Coelestia* 2447:2-4