

# Charity

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North Star Chapter #2

Greetings, Companions. I feel honoured and humbled in being asked to speak for you today. I'd like to address an issue which has been somewhat controversial of late amongst us, but I sincerely hope that what I say will give none of you offence. You are all too expert in our precepts to need reminding that it is beyond my power to interpret Freemasonry for anyone but myself, and so what follows will necessarily be only my opinion. I will speak today on the concept of Charity.

When we were initiated, our "charity" was put in some measure to the test. This "test," like all of our ritual, is meant to be a seed, a starting point from which we are to develop our understanding of the virtue discussed. Sadly, it seems that (as with many other aspects of our rituals) many of my brethren have chosen to take this lesson at face value, and not to delve any deeper into its significance. I would contend to you, brethren, that many of us do not even understand the meaning of Charity, as it is properly used.

In the lecture of the first degree, we perceive an image of the four cardinal virtues (prudence, justice, temperance, and fortitude), supporting a ladder of many rungs, the chief of these being the three theological virtues (Faith, Hope, and Charity). This is identical to the traditional Catholic system. What we appear to have forgotten is that the three theological virtues are not humanity's by right – they are *graces*, sent by God to those who have prepared their hearts to receive them. That is to say, that we cannot **will** ourselves to be charitable, but rather we must act in such a way as to receive the blessing of Charity. How may we act, then, to prepare ourselves to receive the gift of Charity? What is this gift of Charity, anyway?

I have heard from eminent brethren that Charity is "giving of one's time, talent, or treasure to help those who are in need." Certainly, this sounds like a nice thing to do. But I question if this is what Saint Paul meant when he wrote:

" 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. 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. 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. Charity suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up, Doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil; Rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth; Beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things."

Nor do I suspect that it was what the Koran means when it says

“There is no good in most of their secret counsels except (in his) who enjoins charity or goodness or reconciliation between people; and whoever does this seeking Allah's pleasure, We will give him a mighty reward.”

Indeed, it seems that many of us are seeking to follow some procedure or set of laws because we wish to prove our “Charity,” to show that we are worthwhile, good people. We seem to think that there is some celestial account book that is taking note of how much money we have given, or how much personal pain or trouble we have given ourselves, in pursuit of some charitable cause... if we can only give enough hours of our time, or enough of our income, to help those stricken with AIDS, or cancer, or orthopaedic problems, we will prove ourselves righteous. Is this really the right reason to do these things? Can we buy or work our way into virtue?

“When **Bodhidharma** crossed into China, his fame as an Enlightened Master preceded him. His arrival was eagerly anticipated by the Emperor, who invited him to come immediately to the Palace. The Emperor was shocked to find Bodhidharma to be a rough man dressed in rags. The Emperor stifled his misgivings and gave Bodhidharma a royal welcome including feasting, entertainment and gift-giving.

At the height of the celebration, the Emperor recounted to those present the hundreds of temples he had built and supported with Royal funds, the schools staffed and managed where thousands of students study scriptures and the monasteries all throughout the Empire that he established and maintains and the numerous translations of Buddhist Scriptures and commentaries that he sponsored. Dozens of monks and nuns in turn praised the Emperor's generosity, charity and protection.

After this display, the Emperor asked Bodhidharma, “With my extensive support of Buddhism, how much merit have I earned toward my future in Heaven?”

Bodhidharma replied, “None.”

The Emperor was shocked and outraged. He rose angrily and confronted Bodhidharma saying, “You are supposed to be an Enlightened Master — don't you even know the law of karma?”

“No law; no karma,” said Bodhidharma.”

Does this mean, then, that all our charitable works are pointless? Are we just fooling ourselves in thinking it is right for Freemasons to build hospitals for sick children, help the poor and destitute, work to fight disease, *etc., etc.*? NO!!! On the contrary, these are very worthwhile activities. But they should be the **result** of the

Charity we have allowed into our hearts. We must not assume that they **are** Charity itself.

Charity is an internal transformation in our natures. Charity is that which allows us to forgive others if they sin against us not seven times, but seventy times seven times. Charity cannot hate – Charity gives us a mystic, passionate desire for the good of others, even when we are forced to correct their behaviour.

The Charitable individual helps others through simply existing. He or she does not need to undertake brave or difficult tasks or labours to express his or her Charity – it cannot help but be expressed, because the Charitable person feels love for every other sentient being. Indeed, the truly Charitable do not see the difference between another's good and their own.

To the Charitable, the greatest law is not simply “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you,” but indeed “Do unto others as they would be done by!”

I have no illusions about the fact that this sounds naïve, even self-destructive. It is obvious that we fallible human beings may have great difficulty living up to this ideal. But the impossibility of a great ideal is not an excuse for our failure to try to achieve it. As Freemasons, if we are truly Freemasons, we must try to improve ourselves, not simply to the degree that is convenient, but as far as is required of us by the GAOTU. We **must not** sit back on our laurels and say, “We gave more money to sick children this year than the Elks and the KofC's combined!” We should not be content until we can say that our families are sanctuaries of harmony and love, that we have forgiven our worst enemy (and will continue so to do), that we hate no-one because of their political, religious, or even ethical stance, that no-one looks to us in vain for assistance, that we do all we can to avoid creating unhappiness and to promote happiness, that to us **every** man is a brother and **every** woman a sister, and that our hearts burn with an unquenchable passion for the good of all in this world and the next.

And when the day arrives when we can say this in honesty, **then** will Freemasonry truly shine as she should; **then** will we have truly earned our titles; **then** will we have raised a superstructure perfect in its parts, and honourable to the builder.