



The Virtues and Character Development Project

The One who calls you is faithful, and He will do it.

I Thessalonians 5:24

Charity – Pre-Activity Curriculum

Note – before reading the content in this module, it is important that *Step 1* has been completed (reading *Overview – a background perspective for parents to get started*). This provides the context on which each virtue module is based. As pointed out in that document, the instructions are written to parents, but they apply to any leader who is working with youth (ages 5 to 25). Since the family unit is the foundational one, the focus of the materials lies here. Previous completion of the modules on *Humility*, *Gratitude*, and *Generosity* also is helpful.

Our journey in virtue formation began with *humility*, where we learned that we gain from the investment of others. Next, *gratitude* showed us that giving thanks is beneficial to us and to the community. The third virtue, *generosity*, is a means to take our gratitude to a further step, which is deeper and fuller. Now we come to *charity*, which interweaves the other virtues into a whole. We will be using this word, *charity*, in the way that it was used in classical terms, centuries ago, before it became a synonym for giving to those in need.

The word *charity* comes from the Latin *caritas*, which means *love*. This is the reason that modern translations of the Bible replace *charity* (in the *King James Version*) with *love*. For example, the original Greek word in I Corinthians 13 is *agapē*, which is divine love. So, it is fitting that the *KJV* used *charity* in its translation, and it is fitting that modern translations use *love*; these all are intended to show that *agapē* is God's love. However, over time, the use of *love* has shifted to thinking of love as emotion. Similarly, *charity* now is viewed as giving, with a focus on the outcome.

The reason that we are choosing to refer to *charity* as a virtue is two-fold. First, the use centuries ago was much closer to the meaning of *agapē* in the Bible. There is both an internal aspect to what is meant and an external aspect regarding how it is lived out. The internal and external aspects match more closely with the idea of a virtue. Second, using *love* as a virtue lacks an understanding of *agapē* because today's culture has lessened the internal impact that comes with virtue formation, focusing primarily on the feelings associated with *love*. We will see that *charity* has a component that, when lived out, results in a view toward others wherein their benefit is a goal without any desire for a return. While many people have a mixture of motives, including what someone might gain from giving to another, *charity* at its heart is rooted in virtue that is deep within. Social scientists Alvin Gouldner and Robert Cialdini point out that there is a sense of reciprocity or reciprocation that often arises when someone is involved in giving. This means that both the giver and the receiver develop a belief that the giving requires a similar action to repay what has been provided. While this might be a positive outcome in the life of the recipient, it is counter to what *charity* is in the giver, who is giving out of his heart.

While it may not be possible to determine one's motives when someone gives, we are interested in developing godly character that results in true *charity*, caring about the other person and not what one gains as a result. Someone may focus on the amount that was given since the help would be greater with a greater gift. However, Jesus taught us that this is the wrong focus.

Jesus sat down opposite the place where the offerings were put and watched the crowd putting their money into the temple treasury. Many rich people threw in large amounts. But a poor widow came and put in two very small copper coins, worth only a few cents. Calling his disciples to him, Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything—all she had to live on” (Mark 12:41-44).

Jesus pointed out that the widow gave out of her heart, and not her riches. This is an example of *charity*. He understood that changing the heart, as in virtue formation, leads to external actions that reflect the changes inside. This also positively impacts the community. C. S. Lewis described this not as an emotion, but as a *state of the will which we have naturally about ourselves, and must learn to have about other people*.

Jesus said it this way:

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another (John 13:34-35).

Paul J. Wadell (in his chapter *Charity: How Friendship with God Unfolds*) examined the extensive writings of St. Thomas Aquinas on the nature of *charity* (in his *Summa Theologica*). A review of some of Aquinas’ major points will help us understand why *charity* is so key to the development of godly character. While Aristotle wrote about virtues, he did not believe that people could have a personal relationship with the gods (God). Aquinas, on the other hand, based his insights on the view that God reached out to humans with a divine love that desired a relationship that was between friends. This would be lived out as an intimate communion with God, sharing His life, goodness, and happiness. The highest level of living is only possible in this union with God. Although people desire whatever is necessary for human flourishing, this life of friendship with God is *an ever deepening partnership in which we who are loved and cherished by God, love and cherish God in return*. While we may experience this now, it will be perfectly experienced in heaven. *Charity* is the center of this lifestyle incorporating all the virtues, and is exhibited in godly character.

It is important to understand that, while there is a deep relationship with God in this friendship, it will continue to grow and expand to include those around us, possibly even including our enemies. The friendship that God desires must move us out of ourselves and into the world through the various virtues (e.g., humility, gratitude, generosity, kindness, compassion). Therefore, one cannot love God without loving one’s neighbor.

Jesus replied: “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself’” (Matthew 22:37-39).

Aquinas wrote that *morality begins in the awareness of our completeness and recognition that we are far from whole*. Our search for contentment (happiness) will never be satisfied until we experience a life of charity-friendship with God. St. Augustine stated it this way: *You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you*. To Aquinas, the virtuous life is when we realize that *we must become persons whose lives are rooted in and thoroughly characterized by charity*. Thus, *we can knowingly and willingly partake of the goodness, beauty, and holiness of God*. *Charity* enables this to occur.

While charity involves friendship with God, it also requires involvement in the lives of others in our community. Both friendship with God and friendship with others cannot be accomplished by human

effort. It is only through the power of the Holy Spirit that we are able to grow in *charity*. This is available to everyone who desires to experience it. Therefore, our friendships are divinely sourced.

It is important to recognize that friendship is a relationship in which both participants are committed to the other's good. So, the friends not only desire the good for each other, but also engage in bringing that about. We see God's example of this in sending His Son to die for us. When we accept this gift, and allow the Holy Spirit to work in our lives, we begin to live out *charity* in the lives of our friends, as stated in I John 4:10-11: *This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.* The life that God shares with us enables us to share with others. As a result, we share *koinonia* (fellowship) with God and others.

It is vital that we understand the charity-friendship must expand to others. We love others because we love God. This leads us to love for their good so they are able to experience God in the same way. Aquinas stated, *Charity is the universal community of all those in via; the only truly universal community of all those who find themselves called to everlasting beatitude in God. Charity thus makes us true friends of one another even now so that we consider others as part of ourselves, and want for them the same good we want for ourselves.* Consider the love of a man and a woman when they marry. The man loves his wife, but also loves her family because he loves her. They in turn love him and his family. This connection expands to those whom the family loves. When these loves continue to connect, it becomes possible to love one's enemies because they are loved by someone who is loved. This unity began in the heart of God, but extends to many others. *Charity creates the most radically intimate community possible because through its grace, God dwells in each one of us as we dwell together in God.* Charity, therefore, becomes a virtue that forms how we live together. While we might be closer to those in our family, it is only the degree to which *charity* is involved, not the basic nature of *charity*, which is the same toward everyone.

The result of *charity* in this way may appear in giving to others, including those who could not, or would not, repay us. (It is this aspect of *charity* that remained as the meaning of the word changed over time.) This is a demonstration of the extent to which *charity* may form in one's nature. Our community now is without limit. Jesus taught this in the story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). Here He indicates that *charity* may appear as showing mercy to those in need. It may become *kindness*, where *charity* is practiced through seeking a way to help others, including giving materially to meet physical needs (Matthew 25:31-46).

Jonathan Edwards developed a series of sermons on the meaning of I Corinthians 13, where Paul describes the nature and place of *charity* (*agapē* love) in the life of a Christian. He concludes that *charity*, which is unconditional, selfless, and sacrificial, is central in all activities. Without *charity*, nothing anyone does has any value.

Let a man have what he will, and do what he will, it signifies nothing without charity; which surely implies that charity is the great thing, and that everything which has not charity in some way contained or implied in it, is nothing, and that this charity is the life and soul of all religion, without which all things that wear the name of virtues are empty and vain.

This divine love comes from God to each Christian by the Holy Spirit. While it may take on different appearances from one individual to another, the foundation is the same in each heart. Therefore, the same motive is present in each person. Our love to God will result in a humble walk. This will lead us to all kinds of actions toward others *for real love and friendship always dispose us to give those we love their due, and never to wrong them. If your heart is full of love, it will find vent; you will find or make ways enough to express your love in deeds.*

Edwards continues by pointing out that *all that men can do, and all that they can suffer, can never make up for the want [lack] of sincere Christian love in the heart*. Our inclination to focus on circumstances and how we act causes us to lose sight of the importance of *charity* in our heart. Patience is a vital aspect that requires *charity* for us to endure. This comes from a desire to imitate Jesus, who suffered on the cross for us. These experiences teach us to see God at work in all circumstances. As we learn to look for God's hand, we learn to turn to Him and to depend on Him. This is part of *charity* in action, living out *humility*.

Similarly, the many kindnesses that we may do are important, but *charity* must be at the center. It becomes our nature to freely do good to others by giving them what they need out of what we have. This may be in forms of material goods, or it may be suffering with them. In this way, we do good, even to our enemies (Matthew 5:38-48). God also desires that we do this cheerfully (I Corinthians 9:7), liberally, and bountifully, which is only possible when we have been transformed in our nature by the Holy Spirit. Remember, we learned in *generosity* that we have a God of abundance.

Charity is the opposite of envy. This is evident in outward expressions, but also is rooted in the disposition of the heart. In fact, *charity* rejoices in the prosperity of others. The *humility* evident in *charity* arises when we recognize (a) the greatness of God, and (b) the distance between God and us that He traveled to bring *charity* to us. As we acknowledge how little we are before God, we become disposed to give all the glory to God for anything He does or anything we do. This also results in being humble before others. We desire to help others know God and meet whatever needs we can to enable them to come into relationship with Him. Selfishness has no place in the person who is learning *charity*. As a result, this individual seeks the good in others. Caring only about oneself hinders development of *charity* since *charity* lives out a deep love for God that results in love for others. Learning to depend on God alone becomes part of *charity*. We realize that God will take care of us. We are free to give to others (*generosity*).

Charity does not think evil of others (or think uncharitably). This is *Generosity of the Mind*. Many people readily think that other people are acting with evil intentions. Often, this thought arises because the individual is not willing to accept that this reflects how he is acting. God is working to transform us to desire truth in all aspects of our lives. This disposes us to live holy lives of humility and reverence before God.

Therefore, it is clear that *charity* is the virtue that promotes all the other virtues, making them dependent on each other. Since they have the same source, Jesus Christ, and arise through the work of the Holy Spirit, the end result is godly character that *endures all things* (I Corinthians 13:7). With *charity* in one's heart, one is able to withstand any opposition and any circumstance. In addition, *charity never fails* (I Corinthians 13:8). It will last throughout one's life and will be vital throughout all of eternity. All relationships in heaven will be lived out through *charity*. They will all have mutual love that is unconditional, selfless, and sacrificial.

Now it is time to turn to the list of activities for the *Charity* module, which provide both general and age-specific options for families. As before, these are intended to assist you in developing habits in your children. Use these or create your own ideas that would be better for your family. As you know, it is necessary to repeat the actions over and over until they become *second nature*. So, repetition (daily, weekly) will be very important.

May God bless you as you work on formation of the virtue of *Charity*.