



The Virtues and Character Development Project

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

I Thessalonians 5:24

CHAPTER REVIEW

Charity: How Friendship with God Unfolds in Love for Others

Paul J Wadell

Charity: How Friendship with God Unfolds in Love for Others by Paul J. Wadell is a chapter in the book *Virtues and Their Vices*, edited by Kevin Timpe and Craig Boyd. Wadell examines the views of Aristotle and St. Thomas Aquinas regarding the good life among people. Aristotle, in his *Eudaimonia*, held that a personal relationship with the gods (God) was not possible, whereas Aquinas, in his *Summa Theologica*, contended that God reached out to man in charity and friendship. Thus, the ultimate goal is intimate communion with God, which is evident as the natural desire for happiness and human flourishing. *Such blissful union with God is best understood as a life of friendship with God: an ever-deepening partnership in which we who are loved and cherished by God love and cherish God in return.* For Aquinas, this is *charity*, which *is experienced imperfectly now, but will be perfectly experienced in heaven.* Charity is a distinctive way of life that incorporates all the virtues. Charity is not merely a spiritual relationship with God; rather, it must continuously expand to include others, even our enemies. It manifests itself as a true friendship with God that unfolds in love (and friendship) with others.

Aquinas believed that morality begins in our recognition of our lack of completeness, our poverty. We respond in *searching for something that will fill us with wholeness and happiness.* Without this desire, we would not do anything. However, a person's yearning for more becomes *...an object on which his desire finally rests dominates a man's affections, and sways his whole life.* Aquinas holds that *human beings will never find the happiness and fulfillment they seek apart from a life of charity-friendship with God.* Our desires must be transformed and directed toward God. *When we are unhappy, it is because our loves and desires are misdirected. We must become persons whose lives are rooted in and thoroughly characterized by charity.*

Aristotle contended that happiness (*eudaimonia*) and virtues are interconnected. Aquinas' view was that a virtuous life is rooted in friendship with God. We are different from animals because *we can knowingly and willingly partake of the goodness, beauty, and holiness of God.* Therefore, *charity enables us to participate in and reach our highest possible development.* Both men believed that charity requires friendships in a community. Aquinas stated it this way: *Growing in the virtues that bring about our most proper development is something we do not in isolation from one another, but together.* The charity-friendship of Aquinas is necessary for anyone to find happiness. It also is not possible without God. Thus, the grace of charity requires God's help. Aristotle believed that only a special few could experience this, whereas Aquinas held this charity-friendship was for everyone.

Aquinas explained that *friendship* is the relationship in which each person wishes well for the other and is committed to seeking the other's good. *Yet, goodwill alone is not enough for friendship, for this requires a mutual loving; it is only with a friend that a friend is friendly.* In a friendship, both parties desire the good of the other and both parties work to bring it about. This is true in our relationship with God and with those around us. In charity, this friendship flourishes. In charity, *God wants us to love and delight in God as God loves and delights in us.*

Aquinas stated, *Now there is a sharing [communicatio] of man with God by his sharing his happiness with us, and it on this that a friendship is based. God imparts or communicates his "beatitude," his joyful life to us; and through this transforming gift, we are enabled to share the divine life actively with him only through the Holy Spirit. This is God sharing His very life with us. Charity begins as God pours out his happiness into your hearts. This then results in our sharing that with God and with others.*

Aquinas understood that a life of charity must be lived toward God and toward others, with an ever-deepening love for God and for people. However, we must first love God, then we love our neighbors. We learn how to love others by first loving God. *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.* This community is the consequence of God's love in our lives. We begin to understand, and practice, what life will be like in heaven. The virtue of charity shapes how life is lived through its practices. He also understood that charity begins at home, but does not end there. He pointed out that the Desert Fathers taught about serving where one was. He used Jesus' *death on the cross as the most perfect act of divine love as he demonstrated love for enemies.* We love our enemies because they are created in the image of God. *Charity reshapes how we see other persons.* We offer kindness as a way to do good. We offer alms (almsgiving) to respond to physical needs.

This chapter opens the reader to an understanding of the work of Aquinas on the virtue of charity. *In charity, God shares with us everything that is of God so that we might be brought to our greatest possible perfection as persons.* As we grow in our friendship relationship with God, we grow in our love relationship with others. *Charity is the only way to know the communion, joy, and peace that God wants for us and for which we are made.* The content presented in this chapter is easy to comprehend. It will benefit the reader to learn about the nature of charity as understood by Aquinas.