



The Virtues and Character Development Project

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

I Thessalonians 5:24

BOOK REVIEW

Charity and Its Fruits: Christian Love as Manifested in the Heart and Life

Jonathan Edwards

Charity and Its Fruits: Christian Love as Manifested in the Heart and Life is the publication of an expositional sermon series on I Corinthians 13 by Jonathan Edwards. This book provides insights into the relationship between *charity* and the Christian life. His style is to express a doctrine (his thesis) and then provide evidence to support his position. He often ends his lecture with a suggested application of the doctrine.

In the first lecture, Edwards addresses the use of *charity* in I Corinthians 13:1-3. He points out that the Greek word in the original text is *agape*, which is defined as an unconditional, selfless, and sacrificial love that is the highest form of love. It is not merely an emotion, but an inner disposition whereby one is dear to another. As a result, he uses *charity*, *Christian love*, and *divine love* interchangeably throughout his lectures. Edwards notes that Paul states that, while a person may have anything or may do anything, if there is no *charity* behind it, these have no value. Therefore, what is of value is *charity*, which *is the life and soul of all religion, without which all things that wear the name of virtues are empty and vain*. True Christian love, which comes from the work of the Spirit, will dispose the believer to all proper acts of respect to both God and man. This love, being lived out in this manner, will result in walking humbly with God and being disposed to acts of justice toward neighbors. This shows that all Christian exercises of the heart arise from *charity*. He points out that, *if your heart is full of love, it will find vent; you will find or make ways enough to express your love in deeds*.

The second lecture returns to I Corinthians 13:1-2, where Edwards compares *charity* to extraordinary gifts of the Spirit, stating, *the ordinary influence of the Spirit of God, working the grace of charity in the heart, is a more excellent blessing than any of the extraordinary gifts of the Spirit*. He distinguishes ordinary gifts (those usually present) from extraordinary gifts (only present on special occasions). While these extraordinary gifts are wonderful, *the ordinary influence of the Spirit of God, working the grace of charity in the heart, is a far more excellent privilege than any of them*.

In Lecture 3, Edwards proposes that verse 3 shows *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*. Neither what one does (performances) nor what one suffers has value if *charity* is lacking because *if we make a great show of respect and love to God, in the outward actions, while there is no sincerity in the heart, it is but hypocrisy and practical lying unto the Holy One*.

Lectures 4, 5 and 6 examine verse 4. *Charity, or a truly Christian spirit, will dispose us meekly to bear the evil that is received from others, or the injuries that others may do to us*. *Charity* disposes the Christian to bear such injuries due to love to God and the Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, *charity* tends to a life of humility, which is one root of a meek and long-suffering spirit. Furthermore, love to God disposes men to see His hand in everything. *The spirit of Christian long-suffering, and of meekness in bearing injuries, is a mark of true greatness of soul*. Edwards compares injuries from men to what we have offered to God, which are far greater. He concludes that God will undertake for you in all circumstances if you obey his commands. He continues by stating that *charity, or a truly Christian spirit, will dispose us freely to do good to others* (both to the good and to the bad, both to friends and enemies, and the thankful and the unthankful), to their souls, in outward things, and for this world by giving them what they need and we possess. Our doing good should be free, cheerfully or heartily, and liberally and bountifully. Jesus said in Matthew 25:34-36 – *Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of*

the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me. Edwards continues in verse 4 with *Charity, or a truly Christian spirit, is the very opposite of an envious spirit.* Since envy manifests itself in dissatisfaction with the prosperity of others, it will lead to a dislike of the person. In contrast, Christian love will dispose us to rejoice with others.

Lectures 7-10 finish verse 4 and explore verse 5. Edwards begins by discussing how *a spirit of charity, or divine love, implies and tends to humility*, which disposes one to freely acknowledge his littleness before God; to be distrustful of himself, and to depend only on God; and to renounce all the glory of the good he has or does, and to give it all to God. He continues with the observation that *the spirit of charity, or Christian love, is the opposite of a selfish spirit* since the former leads those who possess it *to seek to please and glorify God and to seek the good of their fellow-creatures.* Edwards also shows that the spirit of *charity* is the opposite of an angry (or wrathful) spirit. The source of anger is pride, which is contrary to Christian love (*charity*). Anger may be undue and unsuitable in respect to its nature, its occasion, its end, and its measure. A final point in verse 5 is that the spirit of *charity* is the opposite of a censorious spirit, which appears in a forwardness to judge evil of the state of others, the qualities of others, and the actions of others (without any evidence that constrains them to such a judgment and placing the worst constructions on their actions). A censorious spirit also arises from pride. Edwards reminds the reader *How often, when the truth fully comes out, do things appear far better concerning others than at first we were ready to judge. How little occasion is there for us to pass our sentence on others with respect to their state, qualifications, or actions that do not concern us.* He gives the following recommendation. *Our great concern is with ourselves. It is of infinite consequence to us that we have a good estate before God...It is a minor matter to us how it is with others.*

In Lectures 11-14 (covering verses 6 and 7), Edwards presents that *charity* tends to holy practice in the Christian life by declaring that *charity* (a) is opposed to all iniquity and (b) tends to all truth. Furthermore, the fruits of *charity* that consist in doing good may also lead to suffering in the cause of Christ. The *common understanding of charity* is that *it disposes us to believe the best, and hope the best concerning our neighbors, in all cases.* Edwards clarifies the connection and mutual dependency of *charity* with all the Christian graces as faith, hope, and love are presented as connected together and mutually dependent since they come from the same source (the Holy Spirit), same rule (the law of God), and the same end (God). So, all the Christian graces are related to *charity*, or divine love, as the sum of them all. This supports the perspective that virtues such as *humility, gratitude, generosity, and charity* are connected and dependent on each other. Finally, Edwards points out that Paul presents that *charity*, or true Christian grace, cannot be overthrown by anything that opposes it.

In Lecture 15 (covering verse 8), Edwards returns to the superiority of *charity* since it is unfailling and everlasting. Other gifts may cease, but *charity* does not. It is the most essential thing, and all other gifts are nothing without it. Therefore, love is the great end of all the other fruits and gifts of the Spirit.

Edwards concludes his lecture series with a view toward heaven. He notes that *charity* is mentioned as *one great excellence of charity, that it shall remain when all other fruits of the Spirit have failed.* He proposes that *heaven is a world of charity or love.* Heaven's principle is that love is always mutual; all will be united together in all relationships, being able to *enjoy each other's love in perfect and uninterrupted prosperity.* Thus, *charity, or divine love, is the sum of all good principles.* He holds that holy love makes the believer long for holiness in this life. He prays that *what has been said on this subject may well awaken and alarm the impenitent* and encourage them to seek heaven.

Charity and Its Fruits is an important exposition on the importance of Christian love (*agape*) in the life of a Christian. Edwards argues that this particular virtue supersedes all other virtues. He points out that *charity* is a grace from God that will endure through all of eternity. Through the Holy Spirit, a believer will demonstrate *charity*, or Christian love, in the relationship with God and people. The content of this book is easily read by all. Its impact on the reader will be great regardless of whether the person is early or far along in the Christian walk. It is an important work for every Christian.