

LECTURE XI

On Charity

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As Charity is one of the principal characteristics of a Mason, we will treat of it in this lecture. We do not mean to make strictures on that modern error of indiscriminately dispensing alms to all supplicants, without regard to their real wants or real merits; whereby the hypocrite and knave often eat the bread which virtue in distress ought to be relieved by. This is a mistaken character of Charity, in which she is too often abused. Though the bounties of benevolence and compassion are given with a righteous wish, yet they should be ruled by discretion.

The ancients used to depict the virtue Charity in the character of a goddess, seated in a chair of ivory, with a golden tire upon her head, set with precious stones: her vesture, like the light of Heaven, represented universal benevolence; her throne was unpolluted and unspotted by passions and prejudices; and the gems of her fillet represented the inestimable blessings which flowed variously from her bounty.

They also represented the charities, otherwise called the Graces, under three personages: one of these was painted with her back towards us, and her face forward, as proceeding from us; and the other two with their faces towards us to denote that, for one benefit done, we should receive double thanks: they were painted naked, to intimate that good offices should be done without dissembling and hypocrisy: they were represented young to signify that the remembrance of benefits should never wax old : mild also laughing, to tell us that we should do good to others with cheerfulness and alacrity. They were represented linked together, arm in arm, to instruct us that one kindness should prompt another; so that the knot and band of love should be indissoluble. The poets tell us, that they used to wash themselves in the fountain Acidalius, because benefits, gifts, and good turns, ought to be sincere and pure, and not base and counterfeit.

Charity, in the works of moralists, is defined to be the love of our brethren, or a kind of brotherly affection one towards another. The rule and standard that this habit is to be examined and regulated by, among Christians, is the love we bear to ourselves, or that the Mediator bore towards us; that is, it must be unfeigned, constant, and out of no other design than man's happiness.

Such are the general sentiments which the ancients entertained of this virtue, and what the modern moralists and Christians define it to be at this day.

In what character Charity should be received among Masons, is now our purpose to define, as it stands limited to our own society.

Being so limited, we are not subject to be imposed on by false pretences; and are certain of its proper and merited administration. It is hence to be hoped, that Charity subsists with us without dissembling or hypocrisy, and is retained in

sincerity and truth: that benefits received impress a lively degree of gratitude and affection on the minds of Masons, as their bounties are bestowed with cheerfulness, and without the frozen finger of reluctance: the benevolence of our society is so mutual and brotherly, that each renders good offices as readily as he would receive them.

In order to exercise this virtue, both in the character of Masons and in common life, with propriety, and agreeable to good principles, we must forget every obligation but affection; for otherwise it were to confound Charity, with duty. The feelings of the heart ought to direct the hand of Charity. To this purpose we should be divested of every idea of superiority, and estimate ourselves as being of equality, the same rank and race of men; in this disposition of mind we may be susceptible of those sentiments which Charity delighteth in to feel the woes and miseries of others with a genuine and true sympathy of soul: Compassion is of heavenly birth; it is one of the first characteristics of humanity. Peculiar to our race, it distinguishes us from the rest of creation. ³

He whose bosom is locked up against compassion is a barbarian; his manners are brutal, his mind gloomy and morose, and his passions as savage as the beasts of the forest.

What kind of man is he who, full of opulence, and in whose hand abundance overflows, can look on virtue in distress, and merit in misery, without pity? Who could behold, without tears, the desolate and forlorn estate of the widow, who in early life, brought up in the bosom of a tender mother, without knowing care, and without tasting or necessity, was not befitted for adversity; whose soul is pure as innocence, and full of honour; whose mind had been brightened by erudition under an indulgent father; whose youth, untutored in the school of sorrows, had been flattered with the prospect of days of prosperity and plenty; one who, at length, by the cruel adversity of winds and seas, with her dying husband, is wrecked in total destruction and beggary; driven, by ill fortune, from peace and plenty; and, from the bed of ease, changes her lot to the dank dunghill, for relief of her weariness and pain; grown meagre with necessity, and sick with woe; at her bosom hanging her famished infant, draining off the dregs of parental life for sustenance, bestowed from maternal love; yielding existence to support the babe. Hard-hearted covetousness and proud titles, can ye behold such an object, dry-eyed? Can avarice grasp the mite which should sustain such virtue? Can high life lift its supercilious brow above such scenes in human life; above such miseries sustained by a fellow-creature? If, perchance, the voice of the unfortunate and wretched widow is heard in complainings, when wearied patience and relaxing resignation breathe a sigh, whilst modesty forbids her supplication, is not the groan, the sigh, more pathetic to your ear, you rich ones! Than all the flattering petitions of a cringing knave, who touches your vanity and tickles your follies; extorting from your very weaknesses the prostituted portion of debased charity? Perhaps the fatal hour is at hand when consolation is required to close the last moments of this unfortunate one's life; can the man absorbed in pleasure roll his chariot-wheels past the scene of sorrow, without compassion, and, without pity,

see the last convulsion and the deadly gaze which paint misery upon the features of an expiring saint? If angels weep in heaven, they weep for such; if they know contempt, they feel it for the wealthy, who bestow not of their superfluities, and snatch not from their vices what would gladden souls sunk in the woes of worldly adversity. The eyes of cherubims view with delight the exercise of such benevolence as forms the character of the good Samaritan; saints touch their golden lyres to hymn humanity's fair history in the realms of bliss; and approbation shines upon the countenance divine of Omnipresence, when a man is found in the exercise of virtue.

What should that human wretch he called who, with premeditated cruelty and avarice, devises mischief, whilst he is conscious of his neighbour's honesty; whilst he sees him industriously, day by day, labouring with sweaty brow and weary limbs, toiling with cheerfulness for bread; on whose exerted labour an affectionate and virtuous wife and healthy children, crowding his narrow hearth with naked feet, depend for sustenance; whilst he perceives him, with integrity more than human, taking scrupulously his own, and wronging no lean to satisfy his hunger or his wants; whilst he sees him, with fatigued sinews, lengthen out the toil of industry from morning to night, with unremitting ardour, singing to elude repining, and smoothing his anxieties and pain with hope that he shall reward his weariness by the overflowings of his wife's cheerful heart, and with the smiles of his feeding infants? What must he be who knows such a man, and, by his craft or avarice, extorts unjust demands, and brings him into beggary? What must he be who sees such a man deprived by fire or water of all his substance, the habitation of the infants lost, and nothing left but nakedness and tears, and, seeing this, affords the sufferer no relief? Surely, in Nature, no such wretches do exist!---But, if such be, it is not vain presumption to proclaim that, like accursed Cain, they are distinguished as the outcasts of God's mercies, and are left on earth to live a life of punishment.

The objects of true Charity are merit and virtue in distress; persons who are incapable of extricating themselves from misfortunes which have overtaken them in old age; industrious men, from inevitable accidents and acts of Providence, rushed into ruin; widows left survivors of their husbands, by whose labour they subsisted orphans in tender years left naked to the world, What are not the claims of such on the hand of Charity, when you compare them to the miscreants who infest the doors of every dwelling with their importunities? Wretches wandering from their homes, showing their distortions and their sores, to prompt a false compassion; with which ill-gotten gains, in concert with vagabonds, they revel away the hours of night, which conceals their iniquities and vices. Charity, when misapplied, loses her titles, and, instead of being adorned with the dress of virtue, assumes the insignificance, the bells and feathers of folly.

¹The principles which along, should attend a candidate for initiation to our *society* are pathetically represented in the following: Psalm, "Lord, who shall abide in thy Tabernacle? Who shall dwell in thy holy hill? He that walketh uprightly and worketh righteousness, and speaketh the truth in his heart, lie that backbiteth not with his tongue, nor doeth evil to his neighbour; nor taketh up a reproach against his neighbour. In whose eyes a vile person is contemned; but he

honoureth them that fear the Lord: he that sweareth to his own hurt and changeth not. He that putteth not out his money to usury, nor taketh reward against the innocent.—He that doeth these things shall never be moved." (Ps. xv., 1-5.)

² "The misplacing of a benefit is worse than the not receiving of it; for the one, is another man's fault, but the other is mine, The error of the giver does oft times excuse the ingratitude of the receiver ; for It favour ill placed is rather a profusion than a benefit. It is the most shameful of losses, an inconsiderate bounty, I will choose a man of integrity, sincere, considerate, grateful, temperate, well-natured, neither covetous nor sordid; and when I have obliged such man, though riot worth a groat in the world, I have gained my end. If we give only to receive, we lose the fairest objects for our charity the absent, the sick, the captive, and the needy. The rule is we are to give as we would receive—cheerfully, quickly, and without hesitation for there is no grace in a benefit that sticks to the fingers. A benefit should be made acceptable by all possible means, even to the end that the receiver, who is never to forget it, may bear it in his mind with satisfaction. It is not the value of the present, but the benevolence of the mind, that we are to consider: that which is given with pride and ostentation is rather an ambition than a bounty." (Seneca. Of Benefits.)

³ 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. Charity never faileth; but whether there be prophecies, they shall fail whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away. For we know in part, and we prophesy in part. But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away. When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things. For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face; now I know in part; but then I shall know even as also I am known. And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity." (1 Cor, xiii.)