

Faith, Hope, and Charity

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The 2nd Degree perambulation ends with, “And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity.”

This is the King James version of 1st Corinthians Chapter 13. If you were to read it in the New International Version, it changes “charity” to “love”. Or in our case, Brotherly Love. I prefer the former interpretation because I believe charity to be more nuanced than love. The translation of charity versus love is a controversial topic among Biblical scholars. Both words, however, arise from the same Greek word *agape* and either are sufficient for purpose of this topic. The question I have is why is charity or love considered greater than faith and hope? The first degree lecture teaches us that our faith may be lost in sight, and hope ends in fruition. I think it important to explore these assertions and determine their validity.

Viktor Frankl was a psychiatrist who survived the holocaust, and shortly thereafter, wrote a book titled, “Man’s Search for Meaning”. If you haven’t read this book, I highly recommend it. In it, he does a deep dive into the psyche of himself and fellow prisoners at different concentration camps in which he labored, including Auschwitz. This first-hand study of human suffering under some of the most unimaginable conditions led him to the development of what he termed “Logotherapy”, which is a therapeutic process by which one can learn to endure suffering inherent to human life by aligning himself to a sufficient purpose. In other words, and as Friedrich Nietzsche said, “He who has a why to live can bear almost any how”.

Everyone in concentration camps *hoped* to be set free and put the nightmare behind them. Many died, of course, because of what was out of their control - the guards decided to end their life, they were infected with typhus, or they were exposed to conditions that were beyond the ability for even the strongest of inmates to withstand. But where the focus of Frankl’s book lies is on those who were able to endure the terrible conditions until the end. Frankl witnessed some of his companions forge on until freedom finally came, while others at some point could withstand no more and gave up. And who could blame those who lost their will? Imagine having to resign yourself to the idea that every day was likely to be your last, and that you will die at some point while in custody – it’s just a matter of when. Not only were their lives nearing the end, but there was nothing but intolerable suffering expected along the way. The fact that anyone could withstand even a few days of that kind of treatment is an astounding illustration of man’s will to survive. But a will to survive is not always enough. With every day that passed in the concentration camp, the light of hope dimmed. Frankl recalled that cigarettes were a rare commodity and luxury in the camps. Rather than smoking them, inmates might trade one for an extra morsal of bread or watered-down ladle of soup.

So, when others witnessed a fellow prisoner sitting in isolation and lighting their only cigarette, they knew that for him hope was indeed lost.

Hope is important, which is why it is designated as a theological virtue, but it's not always sufficient in situations such as these. Hope is the idea that something better will come in the future. If, in your suffering, you cannot foresee something good coming, then your hope will not last. Furthermore, and as the first degree lecture states, hope ends when something is attained. Therefore, hope is not enduring. It can assist you in getting from one place to another, but a destination must be available or at least there must be confidence that one will become available at some point, if only you can hold on long enough. Man needs something more than hope, he needs a will to meaning. He needs a purpose.

I find the subject of faith to be a little more difficult to explore. First, one must define what it means to have faith. Many have a strong grasp on the idea of hope, but faith is something that, in my estimation, one must grapple with a little more. Merriam Webster offers three basic definitions: allegiance to duty or a person; belief and trust in and loyalty to God; and something that is believed especially with strong conviction. Pondering faith often conjures up the idea of "taking a leap of faith." But a leap of faith is another form of hope. You leap with the hope that God exists and will deliver you from evil. Therefore, it is a gamble because man leaps from what we consider the familiar ground of human reasoning and understanding, in the hope that he will land on something which is uncertain. When one walks up the stairs, he can see each step in front of him - his path is visible and hope of its existence is not necessary. He believes because it has been revealed to him. But spiritual faith is not as tangible for most.

The first Vatican council asserted that "faith is a supernatural virtue by which we, with the inspiration and assistance of God's grace, believe those things to be true which He has revealed... although the assent of faith is in no sense blind, yet no one can assent to the Gospel teaching in the way necessary for salvation without the illumination of the Holy Spirit." In other words, faith is acceptance of what God has already revealed to us. It's not leaping into the dark, but rather it is seeing the light that is already there. Faith is grounded, while hope remains uncertain. Although, God has revealed more than we are able to observe by basic human reason and understanding. This is not an easy concept. In fact, it's one with which I currently struggle. Christians can spend lifetimes contemplating just the basics of what it truly means to have faith in God. Even Pope Benedict XVI and Pope Francis thought it necessary publish encyclicals to aid us in recalibrating our understanding of what faith, hope, and charity mean from a theological perspective because so many had lost sight of what faith is. Thus, whether true faith is fully attainable is, at least, arguable, given our human limitations. At best, the strength of our faith is surely to be softened periodically through life, particularly during times of great suffering. Even Jesus questioned the Lord while suffering upon the cross. Thus, we must not be so arrogant to believe that we are inflexible in our faith.

Can charity provide what hope and faith cannot? And given that faith is the cornerstone of Christian spirituality, how is it that charity can hold more import than faith? Paul, who was the author of 1st Corinthians from which we borrow our 2nd Degree perambulation, also says in Ephesians 2:8-9 that, "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast." Faith supersedes good works, which would lead us to consider it more important than charity. However, let us reconsider the Geek root word of charity or love, agape.

Agape does not simply refer to the modern-day interpretation of doing good works for others who are in need. Rather, it is a reciprocal love between God and man. Man were made in the image of God, and therefore, the charity or love of others is a form of love for God as well. And it's not just caring for others in a general sense, but caring for their spiritual well-being.

Consider that in Genesis 2:18, God said, "It is not good for man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him." Genesis 3:8 suggests that God walked with Adam in the garden. Adam had God, yet God didn't want him to be "alone". Therefore, it could be deduced that while God was the most important, he did not consider himself to be enough for Adam. On this premise, one could conclude that the purpose of the creation of human beings was for them to connect and build relationships with one another. To serve and love one another is to serve and love God.

Freemasonry teaches us that charity extends beyond the grave, through the boundless realm of eternity. What does that mean? As before stated, your hope ends when either your desires become impossible to realize, they are attained, or if you should perish before they reach fruition. Your individual faith leaves this realm with you. But the love that you share with others via your treatment of them can reverberate well beyond not only your life, but their lives as well.

As a Christian, the pre-requisite of faith in the Holy Trinity is not replaced with charity, nor does it replace the hope which helps us to formulate a brighter and better future. However, it's through charity or brotherly love that we are able to bring that future to fruition and strengthen others in their faith. Hope and faith are folded into charity.

Charity also gives us purpose. We should aim at the highest good, which for Christians is God. We honor and keep sacred his creation, most important of which are people, who all have a touch of the divine within them. Therefore, we calibrate our purpose according to how we we can best express the talents wherewith God has blessed us, as well to his glory, as to the welfare of our fellow creatures. Victor Frankl saw this love in how some of the camp prisoners helped provide for each other, sometimes going without despite their own dire conditions. It wasn't just the hope that they would see their loved ones again that kept many prisoners alive, it was the idea that their purpose was to once again be able to care for their families, or if they had none, to care for the others around them – to continue to shoulder responsibility for others. Some, who had already resigned themselves to their fate, were able to continue on because their purpose was helping those with whom they were imprisoned, if only for a little bit longer. When hope was shattered and faith was lost in their sight, continuing

to shoulder responsibility for others, regardless of their own suffering, gave them purpose for carrying on another day.

“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...” Regardless of the truth in what I say, it is nothing but noise if it does not come from a place of charity or love.

“...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.” God may have indeed blessed me with talents, and my eyes may be truly open to his revelations and, therefore, I can accomplish so much for the world around me, but no action of mine will be truly great without it being done with charity.

“...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...” Without charity, any selfless act of mine is a waste because it was not done while orienting my actions toward the highest good, which is the preservation of the reciprocal love between God and man.

“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.” Interesting how charity is personified as “her”. This is something to ponder. You’ll find many examples in the Bible of various characteristics being labeled in the masculine or feminine and these are controversial topics just like the choice of interpretation between charity and love. We also observe in this statement that charity is attributed the ability to endure, withstand suffering, and avoid provocation. All things that were necessary for those who Victor Frankl witnessed enduring the unlivable conditions of the camps. We again see that hope and belief (or faith) are embedded in charity.

“And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but **[indeed]** the greatest of these is charity.”