

CHRISTIAN CHARITY; A DOCTRINAL
SERMON FOR UNIVERSALISTS
(February 18, 1872)

A Sermon Preached at the First Universalist
Church, Bridgeport, Conn.
Printed in Gospel Banner, March 30, 1872

Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought
also to love one another. God is love.

Universalists believe in a God of love. They believe in a God who looks with the equal eye upon all his children; who can never be alienated or estranged from any; who ever seeks the means for the salvation of the world from sin, and who will ultimately bring every wandering soul home, reconciled and confirmed in the good.

The Fatherhood of God, the Brotherhood of man--this is the doctrine by which we are known in the world, from which our name is derived--the doctrine which first caused the separation of the fathers of our faith from the partialist churches; in behalf of which they endured persecution and condemnation untold--and it was this faith in the Universal love of God which made them strong to endure and mighty to prevail against enemies in high places and in low, against persecution and bigotry and the united force of all the popular, well-organized and wealthy churches of the land. It has made weak men strong; those who were feeble and halting in speech grew eloquent under the inspiration of the doctrine of God's universal love; those who were ignorant and untaught manifested a power greater than all the learning of the schools could give, for their minds were illumed by a light from heaven. The timid and fearful grew confident and bold when they came to speak of the power of God, to move the hearts of men and to give them strength at last to triumph over death and sin. It is this doctrine of God's love for all his children which is the life of our denomination today--which distinguished us from all other sects, and which gives us a wondrous power for good. By it the mourner is com-

forted, the proud heart of the sinner touched, youth stimulated to noble endeavor and old age cheered with the brighter prospects beyond. This then is the source of our strength; it is preeminently our doctrine, identified with all our history, plainly expressed in our confession of faith; it glows on every page of our denominational works. It shines out in every sermon, which has either beauty or excellence. It is a constant source of satisfaction and delight to the believer; the doctrine so plainly taught by prophet and apostle, by the writers of the Old Testament and the New, embodied in the whole life of Christ, reiterated again and again by Paul that "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that the world through him might be saved"; that "the Father sent the son to be a propitiation for our sins and not for ours only, but for the sins of the whole world."

My text plainly sets forth the duty which such a doctrine imposes. "Beloved, if God so loved us we ought also to love one another." Or, as the prophet Malachi more dramatically expresses it, "Have we not all one Father? Hath not one God created us? Why then do we deal treacherously every man against his brother?" The new commandment that "we love one another" was based upon the idea of the universal brotherhood. It was a consequence deduced logically and directly from the statement of God's love for all his children. If God so loved us we ought also to love one another. Never could doctrine and duty be more closely allied, or expressed more distinctly and connectedly than in the words of the text. If, indeed, all are one family, if it be true as the apostle said that "God created of one blood all the nations of men to dwell in all the face of the earth": if we have all one Father, and one God hath created us, and if he has designed all to dwell with him through the endless cycles of eternity, how near we are to one another! How precious does every soul become! We feel that every one is worthy of our love: we dare not [reject] the meanest man alive. All are our kindred. Yonder depraved being, reared in the haunts of vice, to whom vulgarity and lewdness have been made familiar by long acquaintance, and the self-complacent sycophant filled with hypocritical cant, mouthing pious words, shedding crocodile tears, "going about to establish her own righteousness"; they are both our sisters. The barbarous heathen in the far off land who knows not the first principles of Christianity and the successful and responsible heathen in our own land who worships mammon and the things of this world, the wandering outcast for whom there is no rest or home, the haughty bigot who feels himself to

be the special favorite of God: these all belong to the same family--selfish, sinful, debased as they are, God loves them. They are all endowed with capabilities of holiness, all precious in the sight of him who died for the just, such poor, deluded beings and the admonition of the Master, ... "that you despise not one of these little ones" reminds us that he is watching over them even now, and he bids us love them all.

We dare not call any man "common or unclean" for our God is no respecter of persons. He has created all in his image; he surrounds them all with his love and has declared that he will save them all and bring them to the knowledge of the truth. This thought makes men charitable and just to their fellow beings. When you are tempted to pronounce harsh judgment upon your companions, or to deal unjustly with any man or to condemn without a hearing, the thought that the same God has created all and that that condemned, defrauded brother will stand side by side with you in the heavenly mansion will check the harsh judgment and stay the unworthy deed. All are God's children, therefore all should be held sacred. All have a claim upon our sympathy and regard. But if our theory is not the true one and the men and women around us are not precious in the sight of God, if they are the children of the devil, their thoughts and capabilities only evil, their nature wholly depraved and themselves destined to everlasting condemnation, then they have no claim upon our charity and the command "love one another" is shorn of its authority and of its significance. It becomes a meaningless phrase, a mere glittering generality. Why should we love the children of Satan? What fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness....

It is because they are not wholly the children of Belial, not altogether unrighteous that we are to love them....

If they are totally depraved and are not to be our companions in the heavenly mansions but are to be forever condemned, why should we cherish them here? Or what is there in them to command our respect or awaken our love? In that case there would be no duty resting upon men to love [them]....

The duty of charity grows directly out of the fact of the universal brotherhood of the race. It is only possible in the light of that truth. There are those so overcome by the temptation of the world, so enveloped in selfishness that their

characters seem unlovely and charity is only possible when we contemplate them as the children of the All Father, and remember that his love never fails, and that he will ultimately redeem from sin and develop them into the symmetry of the angels. As God's universal love is the grandest truth ever revealed to men, the central thought of the whole Christian system, so the corresponding duty to love our fellow men is the most imperative of any and charity the divinest of all the virtues. Hence Paul gave to it such high praise: "Though I speak with the tongues of men and 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 mystery 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."

Peter also pays tribute to the superiority of this virtue, placing it above all the other Christian graces. In his letter he says "be sober, watch unto prayer and above all things have fervent charity among yourselves." Thus higher than temperance, devotion, watchfulness and prayer, is charity, and John carries out the same thought for he says "love is the fulfilling of the law." He that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God." "If we love one another God dwelleth in us," and Christ lived out the same idea, for we find him always loving, always tolerant, forgiving men's sin and ignorance, associating freely with even the most sinful and condemned while he taught men that they should not judge one another, and to the guilty he only said "go and sin no more." And the sinful woman was forgiven for she loved much. That one excellence, that one generous sentiment outweighed a whole life of sin.

Such is the supremacy of love, such the superior place which the gospel assigns to charity, the highest, the most Godlike attribute of humanity; the crowning glory of the Christian.

But I find a great want of true conception of charity, and it may be properly asked what is meant by charity and how is it manifested? Charity in the New Testament is synonymous with love. It means Christian love; that respect and good will which we are bound to feel for all God's children, simply on the grounds of their humanity. It does not necessarily imply almsgiving, nor is it identical with that love

which we feel for our kindred or our countrymen. The mother loves her children with a great and wondrous tenderness. She is willing to labor, to suffer and even to die for them; but all this is not charity. The love of father and mother, sister of brother: the love which we feel for those of kindred tastes or who are endeared to us by kindly offices of friendship, is not charity, nor is the gratitude which we render to those who have benefited us or the admiration with which we regard those of preeminent virtue; none of those require to be enforced by command after command based upon argument and set forth with such high praise,--those are sentiments which characterize the most selfish and worldly: they mark no high Christian attainment. Anybody could love the good. It is the office of charity to be kind to the sinful. The ... savage loves his tribe, his kindred, his companions. Christian charity reaches for other than this. The most selfish are grateful for favors received, but Christian love can bless them that curse and do good to them that hate and pray for them that despitefully abuse and persecute.

"If ye love them which love you," said Christ, "what reward have ye, do not even the publicans [do] the same?" Rather be perfect in the love by which your Father in Heaven "makes His sun to shine upon the evil and upon the good and sendeth His rain upon the just and the unjust."

Yes, charity means more than that benevolence which gives alms or that sympathy which pities the weak, or that reverence which we pay to virtue, or the regard we feel for friends and kindred. It is that love which the Christian feels for every human being, because he is a human being, without any regard to his position, nationality, race, intellectual attainments or moral worth. It is the view he takes of his fellow men when he occasions to regard them in their relations to himself, when he goes out of himself and views them as children of the Infinite, fitted with grandest capabilities, destined to a glorious immortality.

It is the recognition of something worthy of our love in every bruised and battered, tempest-tossed, sin-stricken child of God. It is the spiritual eye which looks beyond the pollution of sin, beneath the hard exterior and sees there the elements of moral beauty--and in that defaced, blurred soul, beholds forever the image of his Maker. It binds together the whole human family, however diverse in characters and tastes, separated by space or time. It links the ages together by a bond of sympathy, spans the globe with a chain

of love which extends from heart to heart, reaches upward to the angels and centers at last in God.

Charity is manifested in outward acts, when men provide largely and generously for the comfort or improvement of their fellow beings. It recognizes strangers, is hospitable, and often entertains angels unawares. Two men wandering far from home meet in a distant land. They are each ignorant of the other's history, associations, or position, but charity makes them friends. They readily render one another aid and kindly sympathy, and never stop to ask about differences of rank or culture, or nation. It metes out exact justice to men in all conditions, to friend and to enemy alike. It tolerates the peculiarities and individualities of others and gives large liberty to men to live out their highest conceptions. It imposes no fetter, places no stumbling blocks in another's way, it encourages every effort for the right, however humble and seemingly unsuccessful it may be.

The noblest exhibition of charity is seen when it "covers a multitude of sins" when it credits men not with the wrong they have done, but with the good they have intended to do, and looking at the bright side of even the darkest life, finds there occasion for rejoicing. Nor is this a confounding of the distinction between virtue and vice. There is a noble emulation with which we contemplate the virtuous man. We look upon him with delight and gather inspiration from his example. But charity weeps over sin, while it pities, loves and strives to reclaim the sinner! The physician glories in the strong arm and elastic step of the man of vigorous health. He contemplates with satisfaction the ruddy glow upon his cheek and the life and animation manifest in every motion, but he sees in the invalid, weak, pale, . . . a frame governed by the same laws, created with the same wondrous skill, designed for the same powers and beauty, and he hastens to do what he can to restore him to health. So the moral physician, while he glories in the truly virtuous and upright man, still sees in the tempted and fallen, a brother in possession of the same immortal soul, but needing human sympathy and aid. Nor does it become the Christian to condemn without consideration. Says an eminent divine: "The man who is most charitable is not the man who is himself most lax. Deep knowledge of human nature tells us it is exactly the reverse. He who shows the rough and thorny road to heaven is he who treads the primrose path himself." Be sure that it is the severe and pitiless judge and censor of other faults on whom at a venture you may safely fix the charge "Thou art the man."

I know not why, but "unrelenting severity proves guilt rather than innocence." So Christ thought when the over-zealous Pharisees brought the guilty woman to be stoned to death and he only said, "Let him that is without sin among you cast a stone at her." And again when with such terrible earnestness, he spoke to the self-righteous hypocrite of that time, "Woe unto you Scribes, Pharisees and hypocrites for ye shut up the kingdom of heaven against men. Woe, unto you Scribes and Pharisees for ye pay tithe of mint, anise and cumin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy and faith. Ye blind guides which strain at a gnat and swallow a camel." Woe unto you Scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites "for ye make clean the outside of the cup and of the platter, but within are full of extortion and excess."

It is easy to pronounce severe condemnation upon a wrongdoer and to declare your horror of such inequity, but it is the part of charity to consider the circumstances which surrounded the guilty one, the motives which prompted to the act, as Burns has it. "The [motives] why they do it." When some notorious man like James Fisk has come to be known far and wide for the magnitude of his wrongdoing and has met with general condemnation, then it is easy to join in the general outcry, make your voice heard above all others in indiscriminate denunciation using severer language than others have dared to use. Especially is this easy if the man is dead and can neither reply nor retaliate; but such action speaks more of a desire to proclaim your own righteousness than of a genuine enthusiasm for purity and virtue. A true love of virtue would rather rebuke that spirit of speculation which marks the age and that iniquitous state of society which made a James Fisk possible. A true and loving charity would seek out the influences which have produced such a character, and while admonishing all to avoid such temptations, would speak pityingly, and yet hopefully of the dead.

When someone, by a peculiarity of position or doctrine, has encountered public odium or been disgraced in the ages of the world, then it is easy to get a cheap reputation for sanctity, by taking up the popular strain, and echoing it again and again, until you have outdone all competitors in wholesale denunciations! But Christian charity would bid you pause and ask through what horrible experience has this soul passed that it should become so warped? Through what wandering, tangled paths has it come, until at last it lost its way in the maze, not knowing the true points of the moral compass, and dismayed, deluded, ran recklessly on without

guide or goal. Charity says go to the lost and wandering one and take away the thorns from his path and point out the course that leads to God and Heaven. Especially is this uncharitable, indiscriminate denunciations easy and popular if the victim of public odium chances to be a woman, for it is the most terrible result of woman's subordination that in her errors she receives no charity from the world and has none for her own sex. Two moral standards established in our society makes that unpardonable. Sin in woman, which in man is regarded as a joke of every day's occurrence, and when the erring woman most needs pity and wise guidance, she is cut off from all human sympathy. No gentle charity seeks to cover her sins or to recognize her struggles for the right. No sister's hand is extended to lead her back to virtue and to self-respect; and yet, the great master taught us to love these fallen ones. Forgive them? Yes, "seven times forgive, yea, and seventy times seven, or till thyself art as an angel pure."

God rebukes the Phariseeism and uncharitable judgment, so manifest in the women of our time. He sees them hard, pitiless, shutting out the tempted from all opportunity of reform, for true it is, "No stumbling block before his little ones can hurt them, like a cold, hard, human heart." Nothing today so stands in the way of the reformation of sinful women, as the hard, self-righteousness of their own sex.

Women "shut up the kingdom of Heaven" against one another; they do not perhaps "devour widow's houses," but they filch from a poor sister her only treasure--her good name--and for a pretense make long prayers. God rebukes their self-righteous hypocrisy. All their efforts for liberty and enfranchisement are vain and fruitless and will be so until through sorrow and tribulations they have learned that greatest of all lessons, charity for their own sex. Charity overcomes evil with its manifestations of sympathy, and seeks to win and to reclaim the sinner by love. My friends, you have seen what charity is: how it is distinguished from other forms of human love; how it is the grandest, the most far-reaching, most disinterested, most God-like of them all. I have shown a few of the ways in which it manifests itself. Your own daily experience will suggest means and opportunities for its exercise in a thousand ways. You may illustrate that charity which hopeth all things, believeth all things, which suffereth long and is kind, by a corresponding life.

I have shown you that the duty of charity grows directly

out of our profession of faith as Universalists. We, of all others, have no right to be uncharitable. Upon us it is laid to show forth this highest attainment of the Christian. Others, who believe in a partial salvation, who see in their neighbors the irreclaimable children of the devil, are consistent when they denounce without qualification and condemn without a hearing; but for us, such things are contradictory and absurd.

The Universalist should have charity for all, seeing he worships a God whose love is over all. When I hear men talking long and loud about their faith in the common brotherhood and in the salvation of every human being, and then see them so intolerant, so bigoted and severe, I feel like asking them, where is your faith? When a little while ago, in a debate in Congress, Mr. Carpenter said he gloried in the Declaration of Independence, Mr. Sumner replied, "The Senator should give some effect to what he glories in. I hope he will not take it all out in glory; I hope he will see that a little of it is transfused into human rights." So I would say to the Universalist who glories in the faith, don't take it all out in glory. See that a little of your faith is transfused into human sympathy, into generous forgiveness, into a large Christian charity!

My friends, "put on charity," leave sectarian bigotry and harsh unrighteous judgment to those of a narrower faith. God has manifested to us a glimpse of his love. He has shown us how that love is around all his children, and how it will, at last, overcome all sin and draw all men to himself. Oh, let us rejoice and exult and go forth saying of all God's works that they are very good, and of man, the last, the best creation, that he is worthy the divine hand that fashioned him.

How should we overcome petty prejudices of sect or race or condition, and find a brother in every man--

Break free your bonds, your minds expand
Take each Sectarian by the hand,
A Brother be to brother man,
Their faults forgiven
And earth shall be a happy land,
A path to Heaven.

Hail the bright day that shall give birth
When peace and love shall dwell on earth

And deep to answer and deep shout forth
That man is free
And reign round each domestic hearth
Faith, Hope and Charity.

But you will not always find it easy to exercise charity. Had it been of easy attainment, something calling for no discipline and self-sacrifice, Paul [would] not place it above faith and knowledge, and self-consecration. It is not easy to see in the hard selfish and worldly man that spiritual nature which shall transform him into an angel of light. It is hard to see goodness and beauty through an exterior of drunkenness and vulgarity. And above all it is most difficult to recognize and acknowledge the excellencies of those who have injured or misrepresented and persecuted you. All this is difficult; it almost seems, at times, impossible and it can only come by prayer and watchfulness and deep communion with him whose very nature is love. And when you have, in part, overcome yourself and are able to look with charity upon some unfortunate, tempted one, you will perchance be misunderstood. Your motives will be assailed by the self-righteous; the superficial will accuse you of laxity ... of consorting with sinners. All these things you must expect. Your master suffered the same when on earth. The Pharisees of his time were ever ready to assail and accuse him that he ate with publicans and sinners. Are you so much better and wise than he that you should walk unscathed and applauded the path betrod with bruised feet amid all the bitterness of persecution? Ah no! You must labor and suffer with him, if you would reign with him. There are proud Pharisees still, and if you are following the Master be sure you will encounter their opposition and often hear their scornful revilings, but then you have to remember that there is a power in love to conquer even this, to touch the heart of the most intolerant persecutor, to win all at last to holiness. By charity the followers of the Prince of Peace must conquer. All true victories are to be achieved by its magic power. Love is the talisman by which the spirits of evil shall be driven out, pride and hate overcome and all souls reconciled at last....