

[Lecture 8]  
The Place of Charity in a Democratic Community  
[19<sup>th</sup> into 20<sup>th</sup> centuries]

Earl Clement Davis

Pittsfield, MA

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The remark is often made that Christianity has had a long and complete trial, but the religion of Christ is yet to be tried. The same kind of a remark might be made about that much used, much abused, but little understood word, "Democracy." The Democracy of Plato, as pictured in his *Republic*, was a government of the people, by the philosophers, for the state. Like all Platonic Idealism it placed greater emphasis upon the state, upon the ideal, than it did upon the men who are in the state. It remained for the rail-splitter President more than two thousand years after Plato to complete the definition of Democracy, and give it the turn which marks the culmination of an epoch-making period in governmental theory. Not until the Civil War had been fought, not until the nation had been freed from slavery, could any man of this nation describe our government in such terms as "a government of the people, by the people, and for the people." Yet even now as we speak the word "Democracy," as applied to our Government, we are conscious that the actuality is as far below the ideal as [the] deck of the ship is below the masthead from which flies the symbol of our freedom under the law. We have had great problems to solve since the Government of the United States was organized. The progress towards the realization of our ideal has been retarded by the constant demand made upon us to absorb and educate countless numbers of human beings drawn to our shores by the alluring dream of freedom and liberty. While this delay in the approach to our true democracy is the cause of many grave apprehensions on the part of some, yet it is prophetic of a greater end, an inclusive, rather than an exclusive, Democracy. So with ever increasing hope we look towards the realization of the old Puritan Ideal of Freedom Under the Law, and prepare ourselves with the greater zeal for citizenship in this nation.

I have tried to trace the evolution and development of the problem of charity from the beginnings of the modern world at the outbreak of the reformation to the present. In the course of these years we have {???) a complete revolution in the idea of the nature and purpose of that which we call charity. The very pointed sentence, "Modern philanthropy has taught us to look to the heavens and ask, 'not alms, but a friend.'" gives in very concise form the essence of this change. Whereas in the old world charity was alms-giving, in the new world it is "friendly help." Not charity but love.

But you ask, "Why should there be any charity at all in the modern world? Are we not," you say, "living under the domination of that terrible law of evolution, that law in which the survival of the fit, and the extinction of the unfit is the one unfailling and inexorable law? Do not the sufferings of the unfit, their death, and extinction, do not they advance the arrival of the day in which we shall be purged by the action of God's natural law, of the ignorant, the vicious, the poor, and the suffering? Are we not then interfering with the laws of God, and the Divine plan, whenever we relieve one suffering soul?"

Or again you ask from another point of view, "How can charity be needed, how can there be opportunity for it in a democratic community, where all ends and aims point to the interests and well-being of all the people? How could it be possible for anyone in such a community to be in a condition where help and assistance would be required?"

We have been accustomed to think of charity as the very top stone of the religious life, of the good life. People who have been charitable, who have given liberally to all good causes, who have endowed institutions and relieved the conditions of the poor, such people have been pointed to as the highest examples of the practical effects of the religious life. Whenever under the impulse of religious emotion, or lofty enthusiasm, we have sought a channel for the expression of our feelings, our attention has been directed with pathetic appeals, and heart-rending rhetoric to the work of charity. Many a small, narrow, selfish soul has deluded himself into the notion that he has reached the

acme of Christian virtue and religious goodness in giving to charity. Many churches point with pride to the amount of their charity contributions, and bray with loud-sounding noises of the good that they do to the sons of men.

But charity, the much talked of, the much lauded and much worshipped goddess of the religious pantheon, is, after all is said and done, by no means the Juno of religious virtues. One very striking illustration of the changed attitude in regard to this charity is seen in the abasement of the use of the word in that famous 13<sup>th</sup> Chapter of Paul's first Epistle to the Corinthians. No longer we find there a laudation of charity, but a beautiful, and nobly conceived, exposition, or revelation of the place of love in life. Whereas the old version reads, "Now abideth these three, faith, hope, and charity, but the greatest of these is charity." One reads in the revised version, "Now abideth these three, faith, hope, and love, but the greatest of these is love."<sup>1</sup> Charity, which in any way savors of alms giving, or in any way implies condescension on the part of the giver, or humiliation and degradation on the part of the receiver, such charity is, and of right ought to be, condemned, and tabooed from the life of a democratic community. Not alone is this excommunication of alms-giving charity being realized because of its disastrous influence upon the receiver, but as well it is being excommunicated as being a thing unworthy of a self-respecting person, who also respects his fellow man. Anything that smacks of alms-giving belongs not to this growing democratic people, but is rather a weak survival of an age that is fast passing.

When we come into a democratic community we meet an entirely different point of view. However prosperous, however thrifty or industrious, however saving or indeed wealthy a people may be, there is always the possibility and even the probability and certainty that the people will find themselves often in a position where the help of a friend is needed. The ravages of sickness, the changes of the seasons, the unfortunate results of poor judgement, the grave ravages of a severe calamity, by fire, flood, or

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<sup>1</sup> See 1-Corinthians 13:13. In the King James version there is "faith, hope and charity," in the New International Version, "faith, hope and love."

plague, the misfortune of accident, the loss of the provider of a family by death, all these forces are constantly at work now, and will be at work in the days when the ideals of our democracy as more nearly realized. The results of these forces will forever tend to make real and vital that saying of Jesus, "The poor you have with you always."<sup>2</sup> Upon whom this misfortune may fall, we cannot know, but it leaves a place in our communities, and even a constant demand for friendly aid, or the assistance of a strong helping hand in the time of accident or distress. In doing this work, there need be, there must be, nothing of the spirit of alms-giving in it. Rather, our attitude should be one of open frank recognition, which carries to the distressed the sympathy and help of a friend. Regretting the conditions which have caused the distress, we delight in the opportunity of relieving it. This is the beginning of the attitude of one who responds to the deep pulse-beat of humanity, and wishes to become servant of all.

But by far the greater work, the most lasting work is to get at the conditions themselves, as far as it is possible for man to do, and remove and alter the conditions which bring people into positions of temporary dependence. So we look with great hopes upon such institutions as our public schools, through which we are carrying light into dark corners of society, and driving away the material stupor of ignorance. The work of this kind is slow in its effects, and the results sometimes discourage, but our schools are one of the products of the nation, and perhaps more nearly than any other institution approach the ideals. Education of the people, by the people, for the people, might be the motto of our schoolwork.

By scientific knowledge and consecrated application of that knowledge, by healthy activity of mind and body, by a clearer insight into the causes and cures of disease, we are making great headway towards reducing to a minimum the ravages which the unconscious as well as the conscious breaking of the laws of life bring upon us.

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<sup>2</sup> See Matthew 26:11 and John 12:8.

By a still broader knowledge of the causes of crime, intemperance and vice, we are removing the conditions of these poverty-producing evils, and await a day when we shall be able to put our finger on the remedy and apply it with unfailing results to the moral diseases which still infest our social life. In one other way we are gradually developing public opinion so that it will recognize the right of every workman to a fair wage, which shall assure to him the necessities and common comforts of life, and thus remove him from the thralldom of uncertainty and a pinching existence.

But these movements which are so characteristic of our democratic community are expressions of our highest conception of life. Yet each year they are making inroads upon the uncultivated fields of poverty, and gradually pressing back the line of the frontier, so that the field of activity for charity and temporary relief is becoming smaller and smaller each year. So, as a matter of fact the community in which we live does not recognize charity as the queen of religious virtues, but rather we recognize her as a presence made necessary by the imperfect state of our development, whose importance we hope to decrease and relegate to the hall of {??} virtues that have had their day and taken their place of abode among other outgrown things. But that spirit of love which is greater than faith and hope, which, incarnated in the work for those who are temporarily unfortunate, will escape its prison walls of pitying ministration, and leaven the whole loaf of our lives. So that each thought we think, each act we do, each work we accomplish will be one of service for all the people. How much sweeter, how much finer, would be our lives, if we could think that no act of ours, in our selfish aims, were either directly or indirectly to bring poverty upon another, and make necessary or possible one single act of charity. Let the love which must make our present acts of charity valuable for alleviating suffering and recovering condition become the dominating force of every act of life, until we shall diffuse and intensify its power, and apply it to every {??} work that we do.

This too is the highest expression of the duty, and function of man who believes, as we do now, in the finality of the doctrine of evolution. When we reach the plane in

which civilized man has appeared upon the state of historic action, not only does God work, but, as Jesus said, "My Father worketh even until now, and I work."<sup>3</sup> By virtue of the powers which are in us, the powers that enable us to think, to reason, to discover the truths [of] the laws of life, we are now become fellow workers with God for the carrying of the Rule of Love, when that condition, which makes charity a necessity now shall have passed away, and the spirit of our nation shall fill to the utmost with the power of love, that which is even yet our ideal, a government of the people, by the people and for the people.

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<sup>3</sup> John 5:17.