

## Briefing Document: Charity

December 14, 2025

### Executive Summary

This document synthesizes a detailed analysis of Christian charity, drawing from a presentation that contrasts the theological perspectives of C.S. Lewis and John MacArthur. The core conclusion is that biblical charity is a deliberate, disciplined act of the will, fundamentally distinct from mere emotion or sentimentality.

C.S. Lewis posits that charity is Christian love expressed as a state of the will, not a feeling. His primary directive is to "act as if you love your neighbor," arguing that the action itself will cultivate genuine affection over time. This principle applies to one's relationship with God as well; faith is demonstrated through willed obedience, even in the absence of devout feelings.

John MacArthur provides a framework for contemporary application, emphasizing that true charity must be heart-driven, discerning, and sacrificial. It flows from a regenerated heart and must be directed toward genuine need, avoiding the enablement of irresponsibility. MacArthur's teachings stress that giving is an act of worship, to be done quietly for God's glory, and that believers have a scriptural obligation to prioritize their own families and church community before extending aid more broadly. The discussion concludes by applying these principles to modern dilemmas, such as checkout-line donation requests and the use of secular fundraising platforms, advocating for a biblically informed, church-centered approach to giving.

### The C.S. Lewis Perspective: Charity as an Act of Will

The analysis of charity begins with the viewpoint of C.S. Lewis, whose thoughts were shaped by his experiences in World War I and World War II. His perspective defines charity not as an emotion, but as a deliberate function of the will.

#### The Nature of Christian Love

- **Original Meaning:** Lewis notes that charity was originally understood as alms<sup>[^1]</sup>—giving to the poor. However, he expands the definition to mean "love in a Christian sense."
- **Will vs. Feeling:** This Christian love is not an emotional state but a "state of the will." It is the conscious decision to wish for another's good, a state of will that one naturally has for oneself and must learn to apply to others.
- **Charity vs. Liking:** Lewis makes a clear distinction between charity and natural affection or "liking."
  - Liking people is not inherently virtuous or sinful; it is simply a fact.
  - While liking someone makes it easier to be charitable, and should therefore be encouraged, it is not the same as charity.
  - One must be cautious, as excessive affection can lead to a form of charity that is ultimately harmful, such as spoiling a child.

- **The Duty of Action:** Lewis asserts that one should not wait to manufacture affectionate feelings to become charitable. People who are naturally "cold by temperament" are not excused from the duty of learning charity, just as having a bad digestion is not a sin.

### A Rule for Practical Application

Lewis offers a simple, actionable rule for practicing charity: "**Don't waste your time bothering whether you love your neighbor; act as if you do.**"

- **The Transformative Power of Action:** When a person behaves as if they love someone, they will eventually come to love them more. Conversely, acting on dislike deepens that dislike. Doing a good turn for someone you dislike will lessen that dislike.
- **The Exception of Motive:** This principle fails if the good deed is performed not to please God but to "show him what a fine forgiving chap you are" and place him in your debt. People can discern disingenuous motives, and such actions will likely lead to disappointment.

### The Principle of Compounding Effects

Lewis argues that good and evil both increase at a "compound interest," making small, daily decisions infinitely important.

- **Vicious Cycle of Hate:** Using the example of the Germans during WWII, he explains that they "at first ill-treated the Jews because they hated them and afterwards they hated them much more because they had ill-treated them." Cruelty and hatred feed each other in a downward spiral.
- **Strategic Importance of Small Acts:** He employs military metaphors, likely for his audience of soldiers, to illustrate this point. A small good act is the "capture of a strategic point from which a few months later you'll be able to go on to victories you never dreamed of." A trivial indulgence is the "loss of a ridge or railway line" from which an enemy can launch a devastating attack.

### Application to Loving God

This principle of "acting as if" extends to one's relationship with God. When people are told they ought to love God but cannot find such feelings within themselves, the advice is the same:

- **Act in Faith:** Ask, "If I were sure that I loved God, what would I do?" and then do it.
- **God and Feelings:** God's love for humanity is a more stable subject than human love for God. God is not principally concerned with human feelings, which are fickle. Christian love, toward God or man, is "an affair of will."
- **God's Relentless Love:** While feelings come and go, God's love does not. It is "relentless in its determination that we shall be cured of these sins at whatever cost to us, whatever cost to him."

### The John MacArthur Perspective: Disciplined and Discerning Charity

The teachings of John MacArthur offer a complementary perspective, focused on the practical and disciplined application of charity in a modern context, where the lines between genuine need and irresponsibility can be blurred.

## Foundational Principles of Biblical Giving

MacArthur's framework for charity is built on several core, scripturally-grounded tenets:

- **It Begins with the Heart:** True charity flows from a transformed, regenerated heart. It is not a religious duty but a natural result of salvation. Believers give because they want to, not because they are compelled. (*2 Corinthians 9:7*)
- **It Demands Discernment:** Giving should be directed toward real needs, not to encourage laziness or subsidize sin. Biblical charity is principled and wise, not blindly emotional or sentimental. (*2 Thessalonians 3:10*)
- **It Is Sacrificial, Not Leftover:** Giving should be planned, proportionate, and constitute a genuine sacrifice, not just what is left over. This is exemplified by the widow who gave her two mites. (*Mark 12:41-44*)
- **It Is an Act of Private Worship:** Charity is not for public recognition or self-aggrandizement. It should be done quietly and humbly, seeking only God's approval, who rewards what is done in secret. (*Matthew 6:1-4*)

## Avoiding Modern Pitfalls

MacArthur warns against contemporary approaches to charity that are driven by emotion and social pressure rather than biblical principle.

- **Principled vs. Sentimental Giving:** Uninformed charity, often driven by guilt, can be counterproductive. It can enable harmful behavior, reward laziness, and confuse mercy with permissiveness. This point was illustrated with a personal anecdote of providing significant aid (800) to a manipulative man who exploited sympathy for his child, only to prove his story false.
- **Responsibility and Accountability:** Charity must not replace personal duty. Help is for the "unable, not the unwilling." Giving should be structured and accountable, reflecting God's design for personal responsibility.

## The Church's Role and Priorities

While the church's primary mission is to preach the gospel, this mission inherently includes compassion and care for others.

- **A Gospel Focus:** The church must not become a mere social service agency, losing its focus on salvation. Providing for physical needs must be paired with preaching God's Word.
- **Prioritizing the Household of Faith:** Scripture dictates a clear order of responsibility. A believer's first obligation is to their own family, followed by their church community, and then to others. Giving generously to society while neglecting family or fellow church members is contrary to scripture. (*1 Timothy 5:8, Galatians 6:10*)

## Contemporary Applications and Discussion

The principles from Lewis and MacArthur were applied to common modern challenges related to giving.

- **The Checkout Line Dilemma:** The frequent requests for donations at retail checkout lines place emotional pressure on individuals. A scriptural framework for giving helps guide these decisions, allowing one to say "no" without guilt by adhering to a pre-planned, principled approach to charity rather than making spontaneous, emotionally driven choices.
- **The Role of the Church as the Conduit:** A discussion highlighted the importance of channeling charity through the church rather than secular platforms like GoFundMe. When the church is the visible source of aid, it brings glory to Christ and demonstrates the body of Christ in action. This approach ensures that the support is seen as coming from the fellowship of believers, strengthening the church's witness.

#### Key Scriptural References

The following scriptures were cited as the foundation for the principles of Christian charity:

- **Matthew 1:21:** "*And she will bring forth a Son, and you shall call His name JESUS, for He will save His people from their sins.*"
- **Leviticus 19:18:** "*You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the children of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.*"
- **Matthew 22:39:** "*And the second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'*"
- **Mark 12:31:** "*And the second, like it, is this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these.*"
- **Luke 10:27:** "*So he answered and said, " 'You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind,' and 'your neighbor as yourself.'*"
- **Romans 13:9:** "*For the commandments, "You shall not commit adultery," "You shall not murder," "You shall not steal," "You shall not bear false witness," "You shall not covet," and if there is any other commandment, are all summed up in this saying, namely, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."*"
- **Galatians 5:14:** "*For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."*"
- **2 Corinthians 9:7:** "*So let each one give as he purposes in his heart, not grudgingly or of necessity; for God loves a cheerful giver.*"
- **2 Thessalonians 3:10:** "*For even when we were with you, we commanded you this: If anyone will not work, neither shall he eat.*"
- **Mark 12:41-44:** The account of the poor widow who gave two mites, which was all she had, representing a greater sacrifice than the large sums given by the rich.
- **Matthew 6:1-4:** A warning against practicing righteousness before men to be seen by them, instructing believers to give alms in secret so that their left hand does not know what their right hand is doing.
- **2 Corinthians 5:17:** "*Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new.*"

- **1 John 3:17-18:** "But whoever has this world's goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him? My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth."
- **Philippians 1:9:** "And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in knowledge and all discernment."
- **1 Corinthians 16:1-2:** "Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I have given orders to the churches of Galatia, so you must do also: On the first day of the week let each one of you lay something aside, storing up as he may prosper, that there be no collections when I come."
- **1 Timothy 5:8:** "But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever."
- **Galatians 6:10:** "Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all, especially to those who are of the household of faith."

#### Analysis of Greek Terminology

The presentation referenced a biblical term whose Greek origin provides deeper context.

Greek Word	Phonetic Pronunciation	Definition and Context
<i>eleēmosunē</i> (ἐλεημοσύνη)	el-eh-ay-mos-OO-nay	The Greek root for the word "alms." It signifies mercy, pity, and the charitable act of giving to the poor out of compassion.

[^1]: From the Greek *eleēmosunē*, meaning an act of mercy or giving to the poor.