



The Supernatural Foundation of Charity



Gary A. Anderson

Modern advocates for social justice

sometimes fear that prioritizing traditional practices of almsgiving can undercut more substantial and far-reaching projects to construct a just society in which the need for alms would disappear. Though such fears are commendable—acts of kindness, no matter how virtuous, do not compensate for deep structural evils—in the end, this perspective misses a crucial ingredient. For the deeper question to be asked is, why do we thirst for social justice in the first place? Why this obligation to help the poor as poor? It wasn't a virtue in Greco-Roman culture, nor is it always esteemed by present-day libertarians—a philosophy that is alarmingly popular among the young.

The sociologist Christian Smith has recently argued that the concern for the poor which is so prominent in Western democracies had its origins in biblical religion, and Peter Brown's *Through the Eye of a Needle* (Princeton, 2012) has provided massive documentation of the truth of this claim. Though thinkers such as Immanuel Kant and John Rawls have made arguments for why secular societies should retain these values, their arguments always presuppose the moral virtues they wish to justify. It's like trying to move a stalled bus forward while standing within it. This raises an alarming possibility: **Do we have any guarantee that a concern for the poor will remain a commitment of Western cultures once Christianity has fully receded into the background?**

About the Author



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Anderson has won numerous awards including most recently grants from New York University, the American Philosophical Society, the Lilly Endowment, and the Institute for Advanced Study at Hebrew University. His most recent book, *Charity: The Place of the Poor in the Biblical Tradition* (Yale, 2013), was deemed one of the ten best books in religion for 2013 by *Religion News Service* and won an award of merit from *Christianity Today*.

Anderson frequently lectures and writes for both scholarly and popular audiences. His work has appeared in a variety of publications, including *First Things*, *Letter & Spirit*, *Harvard Theological Review*, *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, *Pro Ecclesia*, the *Times of London*, and *Logos*.

To see how Christianity has provided Western cultures with a supernatural foundation for charity, let us consider the story of the rich young man in Mark's Gospel (10:17-22).

In this tale, Jesus commends the young man's piety but urges him to go further: "Go, sell what you own, and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven." Shocked at what Jesus demands, the man turns away in grief.

Though these words can still register amazement, their familiarity poses a challenge. Often, what strikes the modern hearer is not so much what is demanded—"sell what you own"—but the promised reward—"a treasure in heaven."

Shouldn't Jesus have simply said: "Sell what you own and give to the poor"—full stop? After all, charity ought to be grounded in a concern for the other, and not spoiled by self-interest. The possibility of an *altruistic* action is spoiled right from the start.

On the face of it, this is a formidable critique. Selfless acts of charity have been at the heart of Christian theology from the very start. But surprisingly this text did not register such anxiety among pre-modern readers. The concept of a heavenly treasury is an embarrassment to modern persons. No modern dictionary of the Christian Church has an entry on the word "treasure" in spite of the fact that this concept defined the early Christian approach to charity. I think it's fair to say that the concept of a "treasury in heaven" marks the difference between the ancient and modern conceptions of the charitable deed.

Charity's Horizontal and Vertical Dimensions

One of the reasons that modern readers focus so much attention on the altruistic motives of the rich young man is that we view charity in a "horizontal" fashion. It's as if the only players to be considered are the donor and the donee. On this view two concerns rise to center stage: the motivations of the donor and the effectiveness of the donation. The latter raises the question of how generosity contributes to the creation of a more just society, an important dimension in modern discourse about poverty. But oftentimes this has led to the folding of charity into the concerns for social justice without remainder.

I should emphasize that my point here is not to impugn social justice. It is a non-negotiable part of the Church's social teaching. But because social justice is primarily concerned with the equitable distribution of the (finite) goods of this world, it cannot capture the crucial *sacramental* role charity plays in the Christian life. Charity, I wish to contend, must be understood along both a horizontal and a vertical axis. The loss of this vertical dimension explains why Jesus' motivational clause has become a stumbling block to readers of the Bible.

That this vertical dimension played a major role in the premodern Church can be seen in Medieval art. There the charitable act was often juxtaposed with the sacrifice of the Mass, the presumption being that both activities provided a link between heaven and earth. (For this reason I call almsgiving a "sacramental"

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Correlation of the sacrifice of the Mass and almsgiving; detail from a Book of Hours with Paris Calendar, 1450-60 (Courtesy of The Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore: MS W.274, fol. 118)

action; though not part of the canonical seven, it's often a functional equivalent.) In order to appreciate why charity had this vertical dimension, it would be useful to look again at its origins in the Old Testament.

Heavenly Treasure in the Old Testament

Proverbs 10:2 is the crucial text:

- A. Treasures of wickedness provide no benefit;
- B. but righteousness delivers from death.

A proper interpretation of the proverb must explain the type of opposition that is implied between the A and B lines. And here we must note that the term “righteousness” (*tsedaqah*) can have the technical sense of “charity toward the poor.” If so, our proverb would read:

- A. Treasures of wickedness provide no benefit;

B. but charity toward the poor (= “righteousness”) delivers from death.

But what of the “treasures of wickedness?” Modern translations often render it: “treasuries *gained* by wickedness.” Though this is possible, it does not provide a good antonym for “charity” in the B line. Rather than focusing on *how* wealth is accumulated (a more modern concern) it would be better to focus on what the wealth is capable of doing (a pre-modern, metaphysical concern). One might think that saving money for the future will allow one to navigate safely the uncertainties of what the future might reveal. But our proverb rejects this piece of common sense. The only thing that you can really count on are the monies you have given away to the poor and suffering. At this point, we could paraphrase our proverb:

- A. The goods you hoard in treasuries won't provide the benefit you expect;
- B. only charity toward the poor delivers from death.

We are almost ready to return to our Gospel text; just one more detail remains to be examined. As is frequent in Hebrew poetry, an idea that is expressed explicitly in the A line is carried over to the B line. As we have noted, hoarding and giving to others are natural antonyms. If the A line defines one type of treasury, then the B line may as well:

- A. The goods you hoard in earthly treasuries provide no benefit;
- B. but heavenly treasuries funded by charity deliver from death.

The concept of a treasury in heaven has been born. But what is important to attend to is its counterintuitive nature. One might

have thought that a safe future could be secured by storing away wealth. But our proverb contends that the only wealth that is truly reliable is that which is acquired through charitable action. The teaching is thoroughly Christological: the way to true security is through giving away those goods that the world reveres.

The Gospel Context of the Rich Young Man

With these thoughts in mind, let's return to our Gospel. But this time let's step back and look at how the story of the rich man is situated in the literary context of the Gospel as a whole. Mark 10:17-31 is part of "the travel narrative." It documents the final trip that Jesus makes from the Galilee to Jerusalem.

The narrative begins with Jesus posing a question: "Who do you say that I am?" Peter answers: "You are the Messiah." Jesus then clarifies what this title means: "Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again" (8:31). Peter rejects this definition and is harshly rebuked: "Get behind me Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine but human things." The scene closes with a clarification of what the Gospel really means: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it" (8:34-35). The message is counterintuitive to say the least. Just as Jesus will save Israel by dying on the cross, so those who wish to follow him will only save their lives by losing them first.

Jesus will repeat this prediction of the Passion two more times during the travel narrative (9:30-

The Travel Narrative in Mark's Gospel

8:22-26 Healing of the Blind Man of Bethsaida

27-30 Peter's Confession at Caesarea Philippi

31-33 FIRST PREDICTION OF THE PASSION

34-9:1 Conditions of Discipleship

9:2-8 Transfiguration

9-13 Coming of Elijah

14-29 Healing of the boy with a demon

30-32 SECOND PREDICTION

33-37 Who is the greatest in the kingdom?

38-41 Another exorcism

42-48 Temptation to sin

49-50 Simile of salt

10:1-12 Marriage and divorce

13-16 Blessing of children

17-31 Rich man

32-34 THIRD PREDICTION

35-45 Ambition of James and John

46-62 Healing of the blind man, Bartimaeus, in Jericho

11:1ff Entry to Jerusalem

32 and 10:32-34). These predictions punctuate the central chapters of the Gospel. Each time the disciples' response reveals their ongoing ignorance as to what Jesus is about.

In sum, what we see in these predictions is both a terse summary of Jesus' self-understanding and the utter inability of the disciples to grasp the point. True, Peter has attached the right title to Jesus' person—"you are the Messiah"—but both he and the rest of the disciples are ignorant of its cruciform content.

The Counterintuitive Nature of Reality

Let us turn back to the story of the rich man. We have already seen that the concept of a “treasury in heaven” is not a throwaway line. It is grounded in Proverbs 10:2 and echoes an important Christological theme: if you want to prepare for the future, don’t accumulate wealth; give it away.

Neither the rich man nor the disciples could bear the message. “Children,” Jesus explained, “how hard it is to enter the Kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.” The disciples responded in astonishment: “who can be saved?” Jesus answered: “For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible” (Mk 10:24-27).

What is striking about this interchange is that it mirrors what is happening in the larger frame of the travel narrative itself. The story of the rich man is a “play-within-a-play.” The dominant theme of the travel narrative is the counterintuitive nature of the Gospel and the inability of the disciples to grasp it. Peter thinks that being the Messiah of Israel is all about power and glory: Jesus will shortly destroy the Roman enemies and the Kingdom of God will promptly begin. Try as Jesus might to alert the disciples that any promise of future glory will demand death on a cross, he is not successful. Similarly, for the rich man. He comes to Jesus asking to be instructed about how to inherit eternal life. Jesus responds that

such a reward will require giving up all of his earthly wealth. The lesson inscribed in our proverb perfectly illustrates the problem that besets this man: eternal life will not come from human riches, only divine riches can bestow such a blessing. And the means of acquiring them is cruciform in nature: worldly wealth must be renounced.

Now we are prepared to address the question that I opened with. Modern readers have found the story puzzling because of Jesus’ promise of a reward. What about the altruistic nature of the moral act that Jesus enjoins upon the young man? But this concern about altruism foregrounds the “horizontal” dimension of the charitable act. The crucial variable becomes the subjective demeanor of the donor. But the shocking demand Jesus makes of the rich man is meant to recall what Jesus has already revealed about his own vocation and that of his disciples: in order to gain their lives they must lose them.

If we can grant that the teaching of Jesus about the cross mirrors his teaching about wealth, then concerns about altruism that seem so natural for the latter should be

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transferable to the former. If we would prefer that Jesus say: “give all you have to the poor”—full stop, then shouldn’t we also prefer: “The Son of Man must undergo great suffering . . . and be killed”—*full stop* (no resurrection as a reward), and “those who lose their life . . . will lose it for good!”

Though this might follow logically, I think we would all agree something is amiss. Why this syllogism is wrong is worth thinking about. It is true that the

cruciform life will be rewarded. But as every reader intuitively knows, the issue at stake is not the reward but the type of vocation Jesus is proposing. Peter thinks that the way to be the Messiah is to go forth bravely—perhaps even brazenly—and grab what is rightfully yours. Jesus, however, inverts this paradigm: the way to embody the vocation of God’s elect is to offer one’s life back to God out of love, trusting that through this self-offering what is one’s rightful inheritance will be realized.

And herein resides the primary point of this essay: the issue is not how I can achieve greatness but *what kind of world it is that God has made and how I might flourish in it*. The presumption is that only when we have grasped what type of world we live in can we figure out a strategy for flourishing in it. The teaching is as much metaphysical as it is moral.

And so we have the answer to the question I posed at the beginning of this essay: the reason that Scripture attaches a reward to charity is not so much to motivate the potential donor (though an element of that remains) but to make a statement about the nature of the world God has created. What kind of stuff is it made out of and how might I profit from the way in which it has been constructed?

All analogies limp, but let me try one more. My wife once taught an adult swimming class that included a number of individuals who had near-drowning experiences in their younger years. This naturally led to a fear of the water. Now, anyone who has done a proper investigation of the physics of water knows that the human body is buoyant enough to float quite naturally on its surface.

But in order to exploit this fact, you have to be *relaxed* and *trust* the capacity of water to hold your body afloat. The more you fear, the more you tense up. The result? It’s nearly impossible to come up for air. Because these students had been conditioned to fear the water, they could not trust its buoyant capacity. They could grasp the physics on land, but entering the water brought a host of demons to the fore. Knowing something and acting on it are two different things.

And so we might say for the treasury in heaven. What stands behind this idea is a claim about the *nature* of the world. To the casual observer, the world can be a frighteningly unstable place. There is a reason that the Romans revered the goddess Fortuna. But at the same time there is a deep desire to affirm that the world was made out of charity. That is why

But at the same time there is a deep desire to affirm that the world was made out of charity. That is why Jesus promises the rich young man a “treasure in heaven.”

Jesus promises the rich young man a “treasure in heaven.” The point of the promise cannot be limited to motivation. Its function lies elsewhere: in the long run mercy will trump all its competitors. Why? Because that is the type of world that God has made and governs by his providence. With the gift of faith we can learn to see the world this way too. Jesus said to his disciples: “For the ordinary person this is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible” (Mk 10:27).

Can Charity Survive without the Gospel?

Charity, I am suggesting, is not simply about making things better on earth, it has a profound *evangelical* content. The renunciation of wealth helps the poor, to be sure, but it also reveals

something about the essential shape of the world God has made and how we might flourish in it. Only with this in mind can we understand why Christian art paired the Eucharist with charity toward the poor. Just as we would not wish to instrumentalize the Eucharist, so we should be wary about limiting the charitable deed to a particular utilitarian end, thus stripping charity of its metaphysical significance.

While it is possible that concern for the poor might continue in the absence of the Church's metaphysical claims about wealth, Christian Smith suggests a darker possibility:

Sociological understanding suggests that beliefs and ideas require institutional resources to sustain. Values, categories, norms, and viewpoints do not operate like perpetual-motion machines. Entropy is always at work. Alternative

values, categories, norms, and viewpoints are always competing for adherents. In order for belief commitments—especially challenging and costly commitments—to endure over time and space they must benefit from institutionalized resources and customs to reinforce and validate them. . . . Time and again, in the historical record of cultural change, beliefs and values once prized have come to seem outmoded, irrelevant, passé, not worthy of allegiance.

“For this reason,” Smith concludes, “I suggest it is worth our reconsidering the necessary metaphysical and cultural bases of the moral facts and obligation to which we are committed, now, while they are still understood and practiced.”¹ The story of the rich young man provides, I would contend, the “necessary metaphysical bases” for the Church’s ongoing commitment to social justice. **P**

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For more on the supernatural basis of charity, see the author’s *Charity: The Place of the Poor in the Biblical Tradition* (Yale University Press, 2013).

1 “Does Naturalism Warrant Moral Belief in Universal Benevolence and Human Rights?” in *The Believing Primate: Scientific, Philosophical, and Theological Reflections on the Origin of Religion*, ed. J. Schloss and M. Murray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 292-317, citation is from pp. 315-16.

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