

**Summary of “A Model of Christian Love [Charity]”**  
**A sermon likely given in 1630 by John Winthrop,**  
**A Puritan newly elected as the first governor of Massachusetts**  
**Addressed to 700 (or so) other Puritans aboard a ship bound for America**  
**(Also known as the “City on a Hill” sermon)**

**In brief:** This sermon is often unfairly cited as an example of “American exceptionalism”. This is misleading. While this community certainly considered themselves “exceptional”, it was not the arrogant sentiment that many assume it to be. Their exceptional devotion to God was to be worked out in exceptional love – exceptional unity, exceptional generosity, exceptional humility – if not, they knew and expected they would be singled out for exceptional discipline. Yes, they were to be an example to the world – a “city on a hill” – but Winthrop’s point in using that phrase was that if they were to refuse or ultimately abandon their commission from God, they would be *made* an example of what happens to those who turn their backs on him to seek their own glory.

The sermon begins by explaining why God places people in a variety of situations:

- To reflect the pattern he established in all of Creation
  - “...**to show forth the glory of**
    - **his wisdom:** in the variety and difference of the creatures
    - **his power:** ordering all these differences for the good of the whole
    - **his greatness:** as a King with many stewards dispensing his gifts to men”
- To demonstrate the work of his Spirit
  - In “moderating and restraining” the wicked so that:
    - “the rich and mighty should not eat up the poor”
    - “the poor and despised should not rise up” in revolt
  - In training up true Christians (“the regenerate”) to practice:
    - “love, mercy, gentleness, temperance, etc.”
    - “faith, patience, obedience, etc.”
- To “knit everyone together in the bonds of brotherly affection”
- Thus, honour and wealth do not indicate God’s “singular respect” for a man, but
  - His glory as Creator
  - His concern for the common good

Two rules should govern our relationships: **justice** and **mercy**.

In our exercise of justice and mercy, we are “regulated” by a “double law”:

- The **law of nature** applies to all people at all times. Because we all bear God’s image:
  - We are commanded to “love our neighbours as ourselves”
- The **law of grace** applies to Christians:
  - We (Christians) are commanded to “love our enemies”
  - We (Christians) are sometimes called to:
    - “Sell all and give to the poor’
    - “Give beyond our ability”

- Practice “extraordinary liberality” (generosity):
  - In the face of peril
  - In service to the Church

**Mercy**, according to the **law of grace**, requires that we:

- **Give.** According to what measure?
  - Ordinarily, “out of our abundance” (excess)
    - Thus we must “lay aside as God hath blessed” especially for this purpose
  - But sometimes *more*, depending on the “time or occasion”, remembering that
    - It’s better to do too much rather than too little
      - especially if we have “means of comfortable subsistence”
  - “When the Lord is pleased to call for anything we have, our own interest must stand aside [...] if your brother is in want and you can help him, you must (if you love God)”
- **Lend**, even if there is no likelihood of getting it back.
- **Forgive** all unpaid debts.

“**The Scripture** gives no caution to restrain any from being liberal [generous] in this way” but invites every Christian to cheerful generosity “by the sweetest promises”:

- Isaiah 58:6-8,10 – “Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice [...] to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter – when you see the naked, to clothe him [...] **Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear** [...] If you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed , **then your light will rise in the darkness [...] the Lord will guide you always...**”

**Why do this?** What do we get out of it? “The way to draw men to acts of mercy is not by force of argument...”. Acts of love are grounded in the anticipation of a loving response, i.e. **To strengthen the “bonds of love” within the community, the body of Christ.**

- “True Christians are of one body in Christ”
- “The ligaments of this body are love”
- Without ligaments, no body can function. It is “wanting”.
- “All the parts of this body must partake of each other’s strength and infirmity; joy and sorrow, weal [well-being] and woe.”
- The resulting sensitivity and sympathy will make us want to “strengthen, defend, preserve and comfort” one another.
  - Jesus himself “became a part of this body, and being knit with it in the bond of love, found” such sympathy with us that he “yielded himself to death to ease the infirmities of the rest of his body [...] From the like sympathy of parts did the apostles and many thousands of the saints lay down their lives for Christ [...] in the histories of the church in all ages, the sweet sympathy of affections which was in the members of this body one towards another [...] between the members of Christ each discerns, by the work of the Spirit, his own image and resemblance in another,

and therefore cannot but love him as he loves himself [...] it is like Adam when Eve was brought to him. [The soul] must have it one with herself. This is flesh of my flesh and bone of my bone.”

Thus: “Love is always under reward [...] The party loving, reaps love again [...] Nothing yields more pleasure and content of the soul than when it finds that which it may love fervently, for to love and to live beloved is the soul’s paradise.”

**Conclusions:** “This love among Christians...

- Is a real thing, not imaginary.
- Is absolutely necessary to the body of Christ.
- Is a divine, spiritual nature free, active, strong, courageous, permanent...
- Rests in the love and welfare of its beloved.”
  - Christians should use 1 Corinthians 13: let it “work upon their heart by prayer, meditation, and continual exercise [...] **till Christ be formed in them and they in him, all in each other, knit together by this bond of love.**”

**Application: Who? What? Why? How?**

**Who?** All those professing to be “fellow members of Christ”

**What?** To live together under a proper government – civil and church.

- “...by mutual consent”
- With the favour of God and the approval of the larger Church, with the understanding that
- “...the care of the public must overshadow [outweigh] all private respects”

**Why?** “To improve our lives **to do more service for the Lord.**”

- To “increase the body of Christ”
- That we and “posterity may be better preserved from the corruptions of this evil world”

**How?** By no “ordinary means”. The means must agree with the nature of the task and its goal:

- “We must love one another with a pure heart fervently. We must bear one another’s burdens. We must not look only on our own things, but also on the things of our brethren.”

If we fail to love in this exceptional way, we can expect the outcome to be exceptionally dire.

Why?

- Because God has called us to himself to be his own Bride.
  - Thus, he will be all the more “jealous of our love and obedience.”
- Because God requires his people – who are all priests – to be holy, even as he is holy.
  - “There were many that corrupted the service of the Lord, yet there came no fire from heaven as did upon Nadab and Abihu.”
- Because a special commission from God requires exact obedience
  - Example: God required that King Saul follow his “articles” (injunctions) to the letter. He failed to do so, and “it lost him the kingdom”

## **The Charge:**

*Thus stands the cause between God and us. We are entered into covenant with him for this work. We have taken out a commission, the Lord hath given us leave to draw our own articles.\* Now if the Lord shall bring us in peace to the place we desire, then he has ratified this covenant, [and] will expect a strict performance of the articles contained in it; but if we neglect the articles contained in it and embrace this present world and prosecute our carnal intentions seeking great things for ourselves and our posterity, the Lord will surely break out in wrath against us [...]*

*Now the only way to avoid this shipwreck, and to provide for our posterity, is to follow the counsel of Micah, to do justly, to love mercy, to walk humbly with our God. For this end, we must be knit together in this work as one man. We must entertain each other in brotherly affection, we must be willing to abridge ourselves [do without] our superfluities [extras], for the supply of each other's necessities. We must uphold a familiar commerce [friendly dealings] together in all meekness, gentleness, patience and liberality [generosity]. We must delight in each other, make other's conditions our own, rejoice together, mourn together, labour and suffer together. Always having before our eyes our commission and community in the work, our community as members of the same body. So shall we keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace. The Lord will be our God, and delight to dwell among us as his own people, and will command a blessing upon us in all our ways, so that we shall see much more of his wisdom, power, goodness and truth, than formerly we have been acquainted with. We shall find that the God of Israel is among us, when ten of us shall be able to resist a thousand of our enemies; when he shall make us a praise and glory that men shall say of succeeding plantations, "the LORD make it like that of NEW ENGLAND." For we must consider that we shall be as a city on a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us, so that if we deal falsely with God in this work and so cause Him to withdraw his present help from us, we shall be a made a story and a by-word through the world. We shall open the mouths of enemies to speak evil of the ways of God. [...] We shall shame the faces of many of God's worthy servants, and cause their prayers to be turned into curses upon us till we be consumed out of the good land whither we are agoing. [...]*

*Beloved, there is now set before us life and good, death and evil, in that we are commanded to this day to love the Lord our God, and to love one another, to walk in his ways [...] that our Lord our God may bless us in the land whither we go to possess it. But if our hearts shall turn away, so that we will not obey, but shall be seduced, and worship other gods, our pleasures and profits, and serve them; [...] we shall surely perish out of the land whither we pass over this great sea to possess it. "Therefore, let us choose life, that we and our seed may live by obeying his voice and cleaving to him, for he is our life and our prosperity." (Deuteronomy 30:19-20)*

\*The articles are the What? and the Why? noted above