

1 Corinthians 13:3

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

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.

Analysis

And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor (καὶ ψωμίσω πάντα τὰ ὑπάρχοντά μου, kan psōmisō panta ta hyparchonta mou)—Psōmizō literally means "to feed morsel by morsel," suggesting gradual, deliberate distribution of one's entire estate. This is radical generosity, total divestment for charity—the highest imaginable sacrifice in a patronage-based society where wealth meant status, security, and honor.

And though I give my body to be burned (καὶ ἔὰν παραδῶ τὸ σῶμά μου ἵνα καυχήσωμαι, kai ean paradō to sōma mou hina kauchēsōmai)—Most manuscripts read kauchēsōmai ("that I may boast") rather than kauthēsōmai ("to be burned"), though both appear in tradition. The concept is martyrdom—ultimate self-sacrifice, possibly referencing Daniel's friends (Daniel 3) or anticipating Christian persecution. Yet even dying for one's faith is worthless if motivated by pride rather than love.

And have not charity, it profiteth me nothing (οὐδὲν ὡφελοῦμαι, ouden ōpheloumai)—I gain zero benefit. Paul's third escalation moves from being nothing (v. 2) to gaining nothing. Without agapē, even seemingly selfless acts—total charity, martyrdom—are spiritually bankrupt. Motive matters as much as action.

Historical Context

In the honor-shame culture of the Roman Empire, public benefaction (euergetism) brought social status and immortal fame. Wealthy citizens funded games, buildings, and grain distributions to be praised as public benefactors. Jewish tradition also honored almsgiving and martyrdom (2 Maccabees 6-7). Paul radically reorients motivation: acts done for glory or self-justification, not love, profit nothing eternally.

Related Passages

Romans 2:1 — Judging others

Matthew 25:31 — Final judgment

Study Questions

1. What sacrificial acts might you be performing for recognition, moral satisfaction, or self-justification rather than genuine love?
2. How does this verse expose the danger of 'virtue signaling'—public displays of generosity or justice performed primarily for social approval?
3. Why does God value the motive (love) as much as or more than the act (charity, martyrdom) itself?

Interlinear Text

καὶ	ἐὰν	ψωμίσω	πάντα	τὰ	ὑπάρχοντά	μου	καὶ	ἐὰν
And	though	I bestow	all	G3588	goods	my	And	though
G2532	G1437	G5595	G3956		G5224	G3450	G2532	G1437
παραδῶ	τὸ	σῶμά	μου	ἴνα	καυθήσωμαι	ἀγάπην	δὲ	μὴ
I give	G3588	body	my	to	be burned	charity	and	not
G3860		G4983	G3450	G2443	G2545	G26	G1161	G3361
ἔχω	οὐδὲν	ώφελοῦμαι						
have	nothing	it profiteth me						
G2192	G3762	G5623						

Additional Cross-References

John 15:13 (Love): Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.

Matthew 23:5 (Parallel theme): But all their works they do for to be seen of men: they make broad their phylacteries, and enlarge the borders of their garments,

Galatians 5:26 (Parallel theme): Let us not be desirous of vain glory, provoking one another, envying one another.

Hebrews 13:9 (Good): Be not carried about with divers and strange doctrines. For it is a good thing that the heart be established with grace; not with meats, which have not profited them that have been occupied therein.

John 12:43 (Love): For they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God.

1 Timothy 4:8 (Parallel theme): For bodily exercise profiteth little: but godliness is profitable unto all things, having promise of the life that now is, and of that which is to come.

Luke 18:22 (Parallel theme): Now when Jesus heard these things, he said unto him, Yet lackest thou one thing: sell all that thou hast, and distribute unto the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come, follow me.

Luke 18:28 (Parallel theme): Then Peter said, Lo, we have left all, and followed thee.

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