

THE LOVE CHAPTER



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**L**OVE  
CHAPTER

*The Meaning of First Corinthians 13*

ST. JOHN CHRYSOSTOM

*Foreword by Frederica Mathewes-Green*

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*The Love Chapter: The Meaning of First Corinthians 13*

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## FOREWORD

He was not imposing, they say—short of stature, balding, and with a puny, if not emaciated, build. In a mosaic portrait high on a wall inside the great church of Constantinople, Hagia Sophia, he stands in white Eucharistic vestments, holding a book of the Gospels bound in gold. For centuries this image was buried under a thick coat of plaster; when Muslims conquered the city in 1453 and changed its name to Istanbul, all representational Christian art was suppressed. For centuries the building served as a mosque, but in 1935 it was converted into a museum, and images of Christ and his saints began to be released from their plaster shrouds. St. John's icon now looms above the site where, as bishop of Constantinople, he preached the sermons that earned him the name "Chrysostomos," meaning Golden Mouth.

To a modern reader, such an accolade suggests lavish and lofty prose, studded with ornamental flourishes. St. John's style of expression comes as a surprise, in that case, for he is brisk and to-the-point. He plunges into the biblical text and examines it verse by verse, word by word, dispatching each topic as it arises. Rather than utilizing the language of self-conscious aesthetic effect, he speaks as if he is presenting one side of a debate. He is a paragon of preaching that is clear and persuasive, rather than merely momentarily inspirational.

He could certainly preach at great length, as well. In his book *The Name of Jesus*, Irénée Hausherr recounts how Chrysostom once presented a series “On the Changing of Names,” as in Saul becoming Paul, and Simon becoming Peter. “The introductory parts in particular were prolonged until the audience began to complain,” Hausherr writes. By the end of the first homily, St. John had only just arrived at a statement of the central question: Why were the names of some figures in Scripture changed? In the second sermon, he continued to explore the subject, setting forth examples and refining the question. The third homily began with a defense against those who had been complaining that he spent too long introducing a subject; this defense occupied half the sermon’s length. We form an impression of St. John as one whose mind was ever busy, for whom the world and the Scriptures offered a limitless expanse for exploration.

The fact that audience reactions sometimes appear in his works suggests that to some extent we are reading a transcription of what he said, rather than a polished literary effort. In that case, his familiarity with the Bible becomes even more impressive, as he leaps from the Psalms to the Pentateuch to the letters of St. Paul, bringing forth themes that tie the whole of Scripture together. That he was able to do this with no tools at his disposal except hand-lettered texts makes the thoroughness of his knowledge all the more impressive. We who can leap through the Bible with a computer program have probably not digested it, or memorized it, as thoroughly as St. John had.



The sermons collected here, on the thirteenth chapter of First Corinthians, present a wonderful snapshot of St. John Chrysostom's usual work. Characteristically, he asks questions; he fearlessly sets forth questions that any Christian, or even a skeptic, might offer, and he deals with them squarely. His style is not to blur, avoid, and emotionalize. When he speaks about the Scriptures, he speaks clearly, straightforwardly, with an utter confidence in God's goodness and justice. It is the kind of preaching that makes its hearers stronger, the kind that makes folks brave.

As was true of St. Paul, St. John Chrysostom was not impressive in appearance, but his words were with power. He had more than one conflict with the imperial court, as he chastised the wealthy and powerful for their self-indulgence and lack of care for the poor. (Chrysostom himself lived a simple life, despite his high ecclesiastical rank; in his first year as bishop he saved enough money from his personal expenses to build a hospital for the poor.) The conflicts between church and state that have resounded through the centuries were vividly displayed in St. John's life. Angered at his sermons against ostentation in women's dress, the Empress intrigued to have St. John exiled from the city. He was brought back to great rejoicing among the people, but two months later the Empress unveiled a statue of herself, made of silver, in the square before the church. The accompanying celebrations interfered with worship services, and when Chrysostom protested he was exiled again. Driven from place to place, forced to march

despite exhaustion and illness, exposed to wind and rain, tormented by his guards, St. John Chrysostom succumbed to death on September 14, 407.

It is recorded that his last words were, “Glory be to God for all things.” His steadfast determination to praise God, come what may, provides a valuable background for these writings on the nature of love and its superlative role in God’s kingdom. Thanks to its rough treatment over the years, his icon in Hagia Sophia is missing some of its mosaic tiles, and a scattering of places shows instead white plaster peeking through. It looks like light; it looks as if the visage of this saint is shimmering, ready to give way to the light that lies within. In this, as in everything else, St. John provides us with an example, a hope, and a guide.

—*Frederica Mathewes-Green*

## *First Corinthians 13*



*If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.*

*Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.*

*Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.*





## INTRODUCTION

John Chrysostom was renowned in his day as one of the greatest preachers in all of Christendom. His contemporaries gave him the Greek surname *Chrysostomos*, which means “golden-mouthed,” because of the beauty of his preaching. He is on the calendar of saints in both the Eastern and Western churches. Eastern Orthodox churches refer to him as one of the Three Holy Hierarchs, together with St. Basil the Great and St. Gregory of Nazianzus, both of whom were slightly older than St. John (old enough to be his father). And he is recognized by the Roman Catholic Church as a “Doctor of the Church,” which means that his writings are specially urged upon Catholics for their edification and learning. Several other saints have been so honored by the Roman Catholic Church over the centuries, people such as St. Augustine, St. Jerome, and St. Catherine of Siena.

St. John Chrysostom was born around 347 (we don’t know precisely when), and he died in 407. He was the Archbishop of Constantinople, modern-day Istanbul, in the days when Late Antiquity was turning into the dawn of the Middle Ages. He lived during the first century in history when Christianity was safe from widespread persecution; his was only the second generation in which most of Western Europe became Christian at least in name, as most people within the Roman Empire accepted baptism into the faith following the conversion of the Emperor Constantine in AD 313.

He was known over both East and West—Byzantium and Roman Empires—for the eloquence of his public speaking. The themes of John’s preaching ranged widely, including expositing Scripture, denouncing the abuse of religious and civil authorities, and praising the work of artists. Above all, the homilies that he preached on St. Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians are considered the most eloquent of all of his voluminous teachings and sermons. For the “golden-mouthed” one, that’s high praise! He preached two long sermons, that we know of, on First Corinthians 13—the chapter of the Bible that is often called the “love chapter.”

There are eleven chapters in this book. Each chapter corresponds to a verse in First Corinthians 13, with the exception of verses nine and ten, which are combined into one short chapter, and verses eleven and twelve, which are combined into another, in both cases reflecting the relatively small amount of what John Chrysostom had to say about these verses.

It will become obvious to you, as you read these chapters about these verses that you may already know almost by heart, that John Chrysostom had more to say about some of them than he did about others. Chapter three, for instance, is by far the longest chapter. This chapter discusses the important third verse of First Corinthians 13, and it does so with the theological depth, spiritual profundity, and application that made this preacher famous throughout Europe. At the conclusion of chapter three, you will even feel as if you were sitting in one of St. John’s congregations, concluding as he does with a traditional benediction.

Also, as you will see in the chapters that follow, he wastes no time in “jumping” into the text and beginning his explication of it. He essentially begins his very first sentence with today’s equivalent of, “Okay, so what does Paul mean by this?” It is best to read these reflections—on what is arguably the most important chapter of the New Testament, after the Gospels—as if you were sitting with him in your living room, and he is opening up the chapter on love, to you. Again and again you will notice that he urgently wants the lessons of this most profound statement about true love to be understood by his listeners and applied into their lives.

It has been said that St. Paul created the understanding of love that still guides Christian morality today. Paul talked about love in ways that love had never been talked about before and never more profoundly since. He made it personal, not abstract, and he seemed to understand the struggles that face any follower of Christ. In John Chrysostom’s reflections to follow, you will see how important the Pauline understanding of love is for every aspect of living a Christian life.

All quotations from the Bible are taken from the translation of the New Revised Standard Version, used with permission. The citations are in parentheses after the quotes; in those cases where it seems that the author intended to allude to Scripture rather than quote from the Bible directly, you will see the citation in parentheses preceded by the abbreviation *cf.*, for “cross-reference.”





THE LOVE CHAPTER



CHAPTER 1

*If I Speak in the Tongues of Mortals*

*If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels,  
but do not have love, I am a noisy gong  
or a clanging cymbal. (v. 1)*

See how St. Paul begins, from that which was marvelous in their eyes: the gift of tongues. He does not just bring the gift forward, but he mentions far more. He didn't say, "If I speak in tongues," but, "If I speak in the tongues of mortals." What does Paul mean when he says, "of mortals"? Surely he means: of all nations in every part of the world. But Paul is not content with this amplification, because he then uses another, which is much greater, adding the words, "If I speak in the tongues . . . of angels"—and do not have love, "I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal."

Can you see what point he is making when he begins by exalting the gift, and then to what extent afterward he lowers and casts it down? For Paul doesn't simply say, "I am nothing," but instead he says, "I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal," a senseless and inanimate thing. What does he mean by a "clanging cymbal"? He emits a sound, but at random and in vain, and for no good purpose. Beautiful speech that profits nothing also counts you as

one giving impertinent trouble, an annoying and even wearisome kind of person. Do you see how a person who is void of love is similar to things that are inanimate and senseless?

As Paul speaks of the tongues of angels, he doesn't seem to invest angels with a body; but what he means is this: even if I speak as angels are known to express themselves to each other, without love I am nothing, but rather a burden and an annoyance. In another context, Paul says, "At the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth" (Phil. 2:10). He doesn't say these things as if he is attributing knees and bones to angels—far from it—but it is their intense adoration that he intends to tease out for us all to witness. So also here he calls it a tongue without meaning an instrument of flesh, but intending to indicate their conversation with each other in a way that we can comprehend.

Then, in order that his discourse may be acceptable, Paul doesn't stop with the gift of tongues, but proceeds also to the remaining gifts. And having depreciated all of them when expressed without love, he then depicts love's image. And because he prefers to advance his argument by amplification, he begins from the less and ascends to the greater. When he first indicated their order in the previous chapter of First Corinthians, he placed the gift of tongues last:

*Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.*

*For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ.*

— *1 Corinthians 12:4–12*

But now, here in First Corinthians 13, Paul numbers the gifts by degrees, ascending to the greatest ones. Having first of all spoken of tongues, he then moves on immediately to prophecy, and says . . .



*And if I Have Prophetic Powers*

*And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.*

(v. 2)

This gift of prophecy, like tongues, is also expressed as a gift that could potentially be excellent. Just as when St. Paul mentioned tongues, he didn't mention the ordinary tongues of all humankind—instead, he described an outstanding use of that gift, like those of angels, but then signified that the gift was nothing without love. So also here he mentions not just prophecy but the very highest prophecy—"If I have prophetic powers," he then adds, "and understand all mysteries and all knowledge"—expressing this gift also with intensity.

After this, Paul proceeds to the other gifts. And again, so as not to weary the reader by naming each one of the gifts, he sets down the mother and fountain of them all with the most outstanding expression yet: "and if I have all faith." Yet he isn't content even with this, with that which Christ spoke of as the greatest, so even to this Paul adds, "so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing."

Consider again how Paul lowers the dignity of the gift of tongues. In regard to prophecy, he mentions the great advantages arising from it, understanding mysteries and having all knowledge; in regard to faith, no trifling work, he signifies even the moving of mountains; but with respect to tongues, on the other hand, having named the gift itself only, he leaves it.

I pray that you will consider this as well: see how succinctly St. Paul sums up all of the gifts when he names prophecy and faith—for miracles are either in words or deeds. How does Christ say it, that with the least degree of faith, one can move a mountain.

*He said to them, “Because of your little faith. For truly I tell you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you.”*

— *Matthew 17:20*

Jesus was speaking about something very small when he expressed himself by saying, “if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move.” And yet Paul seems to say that this is what *all* faith can do.

Where does this leave us? What should we say?

Since this is a great thing, moving a mountain, St. Paul also mentions it, not as though one were able to do this with all faith, but since people in Paul’s wider audience who



might have wanted to follow Christ thought it was such a great thing; with this image he also extols his subject. And what he says is this added thing:

“If I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.”



CHAPTER 3  
*If I Give Away All My Possessions*

*If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my  
body so that I may boast, but do not have love,  
I gain nothing. (v. 3)*

What a wonderful amplification this is! For even these new things that St. Paul adds—“If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body”—he adds another layer of teaching. He doesn’t say, “If I give to the poor half of my goods, or two or three parts,” but, “If I give all of my possessions.” And he doesn’t say “give,” but “distribute it in morsels,” to indicate the adding of expense of time and resources to the giving through careful administration.

That’s still not even half of why this amplification of Paul’s is so excellent. You will not see it all until I bring forward the testimonies of Christ that were spoken concerning almsgiving and death. Do you remember our Lord’s words on these subjects? To the rich man, Jesus says, “If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me” (Mt. 19:21). And when he is teaching about love to one’s neighbor, Jesus also says, “No one has

greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends" (Jn. 15:13). From teachings such as these, it is evident that even before God, love is the greatest commandment of all. But, Paul declares, even if we should lay down our life for God's sake, and not merely lay it down but hand our bodies over to be burned (for this is the meaning of the phrase "if I give my body to be burned"), we gain no great advantage if we don't also love our neighbor.

Well then, the saying that the gifts are of no great profit without charity is no surprise: our gifts are of secondary consideration to our way of life. Many people have displayed gifts, and yet on becoming vicious, they have been punished. Remember those who prophesied in God's name, and cast out many demons, and did many mighty works—such as Judas the traitor. Still, there have been others, exhibiting a pure life as believers, needing nothing else in order for their salvation. That the gifts should require love is no surprise, but that an exact life should amount to nothing without love is what makes the intensity of Paul's expression so clear, and causes us to be perplexed. This is especially so, because Christ appears to adjudicate his great rewards both to those who give up their possessions and to those who face the perils of martyrdom. For the rich man he says, as I already noted, "If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me," and teaching the disciples, he says about those who face martyrdom: "For those who want to save their life will

lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it. What does it profit them if they gain the whole world, but lose or forfeit themselves?” (Luke 9:24–25). For great indeed is the labor of this achievement, and it surpasses nature by itself, all of which is well known to those who have had these crowns given to them. Language cannot describe the nobility of the soul that these deeds belong to, and how exceedingly wonderful their achievement is.

Nevertheless, Paul says that this very wonderful thing is of no great profit without love—even if it includes giving up one’s possessions. How can he say such a thing? I will try to explain.

First, let’s ask how it is possible that one who gives all his goods to feed the poor can be somehow lacking in love. I grant that, in contrast, the person who is ready to be burned alive for his or her faith, and has the spiritual gifts, may perhaps possibly not have love. I can imagine that that could be true. But the person who not only gives his goods but even distributes them to the needy, how can it be that he does not love? What can we say?

Is it possible that Paul is supposing a hypothetical case, offering it as real, as if to propose something in excess? For example, there is that place in Galatians where he says, “But even if we or an angel from heaven should proclaim to you a gospel contrary to what we proclaimed to you, let that one be accursed!” (Gal. 1:8). And yet neither Paul nor an angel was about to do what Paul describes as possible. But to indicate that he means to carry the matter as far

as possible, Paul proposes even that which could never by any means happen. Again, when he writes to the Romans, Paul says, “For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 8:38–39). This was not about to be done by any angels either. But here too he supposes a thing that was not expected to happen. He mentions that which is not the case by way of hypothesis, so as to show his exceeding desire. He does the same thing here as well, saying, “If I give away all my possessions, but do not have love, I gain nothing.”

So then we might conclude that Paul’s meaning is toward those who give in order to be joined closely to those who are in need, to give with pity and condescension. On the other hand, almsgiving has been instituted by God. God may nourish the poor just as well without this sort of work on our part, but he also might bind us together in charity so that we may be thoroughly fervent toward each other. He commanded the poor to be nourished by us. Therefore it says in another place in the Bible that a good word is better than a gift, and then, a word is beyond a good gift:

*Does not the dew give relief from the scorching heat?*

*So a word is better than a gift.*

*Indeed, does not a word surpass a good gift?*

*Both are to be found in a gracious person.*

—SIRACH 18:16–17

And Christ himself says, “I desire mercy and not sacrifice” (Mt. 12:7), echoing Hosea 6:6, “For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.” Because it is common for men to love those who benefited from them, and for those who receive benefits to be kinder toward their benefactors, Jesus made this law, constituting it as a bond of friendship. But still, how is it that after Christ said that both of these belong to perfection, Paul affirms that without charity they are still imperfect? Paul is not contradicting him, God forbid, but harmonizing with him.

Consider, for instance, the case of the rich man in the Gospels: Jesus said not merely to sell his goods and give to the poor, but he added, come and follow him. Now, not even following Christ proves anyone to be a true disciple so completely as loving one another. For, again, as Jesus says, “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (Jn. 13:35). And he also says, “Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it” (Mt. 10:39); and, “Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven” (Mt. 10:32). Jesus doesn’t mean that it is unnecessary to have love but that a reward is laid up for these labors. Along with martyrdom, he also requires love. This is what he strongly intimates elsewhere, saying, “You will indeed drink my cup, but to sit at my right hand and at my left, this is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father” (Mt. 20:23). In other words,

you shall be martyrs, you shall be slain for my sake; but to sit on my right hand and on my left (not as though just anyone sits on the right hand and the left, but meaning the highest precedency and honor) is not mine to give, but to those for whom it is prepared.

Then, indicating for whom it is prepared, Jesus calls them and says, “Whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant” (Mt. 20:26), setting humility and love above all else.

And the love that he requires is intense. He didn’t even stop at requiring love, but added, “The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many” (Mt. 20:28), pointing out that we ought to love even to the point of being killed for our beloved. For this above all is to love him. In the same way, he also says to Peter, “If you love me, then feed my sheep” (cf. John 21:16).



*If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.*

Let’s sketch out what this virtue of love really is, since it can be so difficult to actually see in the world. Let’s consider how great the benefits would be if it were everywhere in abundance—how there would be no need for laws or tribunals or punishments or avenging or any other of those sorts of things, since if all loved and were beloved, no human being would injure another. Think of



it! Murders, strife, wars, divisions, plundering, fraud, and all evils would be removed. Vice would become unknown even in name. If this were to happen, it would be better than miracles, which would not have affected similar results; in fact, miracles rather tend to puff up those who are not on their guard to vanity and foolishness.

Again, what is the distinctively marvelous part of love? All other good things have evils yoked with them. For example, those who give up their possessions are often prideful on account of it. The eloquent person is affected with a wild passion for glory, whereas the humble-minded person, on this very ground, seldom thinks highly of himself in his conscience. Love frees one from such mischief—for no one could be lifted up against the person whom he loves.

Do not, I pray, suppose that this sort of love means loving one person only, but instead it is a love for all alike. Then you will see its virtue. To put it another way, suppose first that only a single person is beloved, and one person is doing the loving; the loving is just as it ought to be. I tell you, such a person will live on earth as if it were heaven, everywhere enjoying a kind of serenity, and weaving for himself innumerable crowns! Such a person will keep his own soul pure from envy, wrath, jealousy, pride, vanity, evil lusts, every profane love, and every bad temper. I tell you, even as no one would consciously injure himself, so too, neither would such a person who loves like this ever desire to injure his neighbors. The loving person shall stand with Gabriel himself even while he walks on earth.

This is the profile of one who has love. In contrast, he who works miracles and has perfect knowledge, without love, even though he may raise ten thousand from the dead, will not profit much by it if he is broken off from all others and not endeavoring to mix himself up with any of his fellow servants. For no other cause than this did Christ say that the sign of perfect love toward himself is loving one's neighbors. As Jesus said to Simon Peter, If you love me, "Feed my lambs" and "Tend my sheep" (Jn. 21:15–16).

Do you see how Jesus clearly intimates that love is greater than martyrdom? For if a father had a beloved child on whose behalf he would even give up his life, but if someone were to love the father and completely ignore the son, he would infuriate the father. He wouldn't experience any love himself because of the overlooking of his son. Now, if this could happen with a father and a son, how much more with God and each of us? Since surely God is more loving than any parent.

Jesus said:

*"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."*

— *Matthew 22:37–39*

The first and great commandment is, “You shall love the Lord your God,” and then he adds the second (never wanting the first to be heard alone), which is like it: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” See how Christ demands this of us with nearly the same exactitude. Concerning God, he says, love with all your heart. And concerning your neighbor, love as yourself—which is tantamount to *with all your heart!*

Listen: if this were truly observed there would be neither slave nor free, neither ruler nor ruled, neither rich nor poor, neither small nor great. And no devil would ever have to become known. Only Satan would have been known and whatever other evil spirits there are, even if they numbered in the hundreds, thousands, or to ten thousand, they would have no power while love ruled. For grass would more easily endure a scorching fire than the devil the flame of love (cf. Jms. 1:11).

Love is stronger than any wall, and is firmer than any rock. If you can name any material stronger than walls and rocks, the firmness of love transcends them all. Neither wealth nor poverty overcomes love. The truth is, there would be no poverty, no unbounded wealth, if there were love (cf. Mt. 6:31–34). There would only be the virtuous qualities, without the bad, that stem from each state, poverty and wealth. We would only reap the abundance from wealth, and from poverty we would only have its freedom from care; no one would have to undergo the anxieties of riches or the dread of poverty.