

LOVING ONE'S ENEMIES (LUKE 6:27-38): THE SIGN OF INTEGRITY FOR THOSE BELONGING IN THE KINGDOM OF GOD

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Abstract: In this paper the author explores Jesus' teaching regarding loving one's enemies in his first sermon presented in Luke's Gospel. The approach is practical, yet firmly anchored in the text and in the larger context of the sermon. The simple and straightforward conclusion is that loving one's enemies is the sign of integrity for those belonging in the Kingdom of God, who are interested in virtues rather than their personal welfare, being freed of the usual ways of the World.

Keywords: *Luke's Gospel, Kingdom of God, Love, Enemies, Integrity*

The passage from Luke's Gospel 6:27-38 is in many ways quite challenging. The aspects underlined by Jesus in his teaching at this point in the Gospel account are unexpected. The third evangelist is in many ways different from the other evangelists.¹ Luke was a very fine, educated scholar, but he wasn't part of Jesus' inner circle as, for example, Matthew has been. He writes his gospel based on a very scholarly, intense work of gathering information, materials, and notes regarding the life of Jesus and regarding his teaching – in the words of Octavian Baban "Luke is an impressionist historian who selects events..."² Sometimes the discourses of Jesus in Luke's gospel are compilations of different sayings and sermons of Jesus, put together in a way that seemed logic to Luke and close

1 "Luke, in fact, is a bridge-writer within the fourth Gospels. His point of view comes midway between Mark and Matthew on the one hand and John on the other." E. J. Tinsley, *Luke* (The Cambridge Bible Commentary on the English Bible; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965), 6.

2 Octavian Baban, *Introducere în Noul Testament. De la Isus la Evanghelii și la Faptele Apostolilor* (București: Editura Universitară, 2009), 114.

enough to Matthew's Gospel or to Mark's Gospel.³ This passage makes no exception from this important characteristic regarding Luke's account of the teachings of Jesus.

The passage is part of a longer sermon delivered by Jesus. It's the first sermon in Luke's Gospel. Before the sermon account the evangelist informs the reader that Jesus spent the night alone, in prayer to God, on a mountain in Judea. The reason why he did that is because he had to make a very important decision and he needed guidance from God. He was about to choose his 12 disciples, those who were meant to be very close to him for the rest of his ministry and those who were delegated to continue his work, spreading the Gospel of God's Kingdom (Luke 4:43, 8:1, 16:16).⁴ He came down from the mountain; he chose his 12 disciples, and after that he started preaching. What is very interesting is that though there was a large crowd of disciples and people that came from Jerusalem, Judea, even from Tyre and Sidon, Jesus is merely addressing his disciples. His teaching is basically for them not for the others. They needed to know it and understand it properly. But why is that? Why is Jesus barely addressing the crowds and chooses to address his disciples in particular? When he chose his disciples he didn't choose them just to follow him around and just to share them his teaching. He also chose them to be part of God's Kingdom. This means that the disciples are part of their world and part of their first century Palestinian society, but in the same time they are also part of a different realm, the Kingdom of God, which is quite different than anything familiar to them.

Being part of God's Kingdom, as fancy as it may sound, can be a very difficult thing at certain times (vv. 22-23). Hatred, exclusion, offense, disdain may often be experienced by those who are of God's Kingdom and affiliated to the Son of Man⁵ Yet, according to Jesus, experiencing the world's injustice should be reason for rejoicing. Leaping for joy is not

3 More on Luke's composition and source compilations see Ronald A. Piper, *Wisdom in the Q-tradition. The Aphoristic Teaching of Jesus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 93.

4 The theme of kingship is very important in Luke's Gospel: "Luke introduces the Kingdom of God as the object of Jesus' Mission..." John Navone SJ, *Themes of St. Luke* (Rome: Gregorian University Press, 1970), 88.

5 More on persecution in Luke chapter 6 (in comparison with the other canonical gospels) see James A. Kelhoffer, *Persecution, Persuasion and Power. Readiness to Withstand Hardship as a Corroboration of Legitimacy in the New Testament* (Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament, 270; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 265-ff.

absurd when one thinks of the reward which is promised to be received in heaven. Suffering persecution on grounds of faith and spirituality has a positive twist: it is the sign of heavenly approval. Those who are part of God's Kingdom receive a prophetic voice and they will be treated as the prophets were in biblical times.

In verse 27 Jesus makes a rather interesting comment: "But I say to you who hear." This means that not all the people that were present there were in fact listening to Jesus. This is the first hint of division in his audience. Probably they were listening at the beginning, but while he was preaching, his teachings seemed to become more and more unusual, shocking even, and many were probably scandalised by his words. He was plainly speaking about a world divided between the rich and the poor, the well fed and the hungry, the ones laughing and the ones weeping (vv. 24-25). Jesus wants to make his listeners aware that social inequality⁶ becomes the germ of conflict and unrest and he makes the former categories of people responsible for this situation even comparing them with the false prophets of the old biblical times (v. 26). Because of his bold preaching on inequality⁷ some were probably raging against him, other were probably leaving the crowd, so Jesus speaks to those who listen, those who are really interested in what he has to say, because they are part of God's Kingdom and Jesus is the one who brings the Kingdom of God to them (Luke 11:20).

But what he has to say further is going to be even more unusual: "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. If someone slaps you on one cheek, turn to them the other also. If someone takes your coat, do not withhold your shirt from them. Give to everyone who asks you, and if

6 Or economic inequality: "The Gospel of Luke frequently alludes to economic problems and tensions that resulted from economic inequality." Bradley D. Root, *First Centurt Galilee. A fresh Examination of the Sources* (Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament, 378; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), 80.

7 Probably Christopher Steed is right when affirming that "the gospels do not portray the prophet from Nazareth as preaching equality directly." *A Question of Inequality. The Politics of Equal Worth* (London, New York: I. B. Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2018). Jesus certainly addressed inequality many times in his preaching. One important example is the parable of Lazarus and the rich man (Luke 16.19-31). Dustin Krummett, "Wealth, Well-Being, and the Danger of Having Too Much" in *Growing Apart. Religious Reflection on the Rise of Economic Inequality*, edited by Kate Ward & Kenneth Himes (Basel, Switzerland: MDPI, 2017), 115.

anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back. Do to others as you would have them do to you.”⁸

When reading these verses one might immediately wonder: *Do I have any enemies? Who are my enemies? Do I know people that deliberately want to harm me? Is there someone who willingly fights against me and against what I stand for? Is there any person that I offended so badly that became an enemy to me?* Certainly there can be many types of enemies for a person that is both part of the world and part of the Kingdom of God.

First of all there are people that could harm us: people that become agents of evil, because they like doing evil, having no respect for others; people who steal, rob, and abuse others in different ways, people who commit murders. These people can be dangerous enemies for anyone, being agents of a “gratuitous evil.”⁹ But these enemies are occasional enemies that don't have anything personal against us. It just happens to encounter them and become their victims.

There can be a second group of enemies: people that are different from us, or people that have different opinions than ours, and people that form an opposition against us. But I came to understand that people that are different, people that have different opinions or even people that are in a sort of opposition are not necessarily our enemies. Sometimes we make enemies of others in our own imagination.

There can be other situations when because of a debate, a quarrel, a rivalry or a problem that occurred between neighbours, colleagues, friends or relatives, we come to be understood as enemies. A colleague from work, for example, sees me as his enemy because I received a position that he believed to deserved it; a neighbour could see me as his enemy, because the tree from my yard throws a shadow on the flowers from his yard; a friend starts to see me as an enemy because I am more talented in playing soccer than he is; I am an enemy for a relative because I received an inheritance from my uncle that he believed it was going to be his.

And there can be another group of enemies: people that are against me or against you because we are part of God's Kingdom. These are people that hate us, curse us, abuse us, deny our rights because our faith in the Lord, which makes us different. They are people that think

⁸ Luke 6:27-31. The Bible quotations are from the *New English Standard Version*.

⁹ On gratuitous evil see: Bryan Frances, *Gratuitous Suffering and the Problem of Evil. A Comprehensive Introduction* (New York, London: Routledge, 2013).

about us as their enemies and they think that they are doing a good thing when they hit us on the cheek. One should be aware that it was different for first century Christians than it is for today's Christians, especially for those presently living in the western world. Persecution and violent persecution were more common place for the disciples than it is for today's Christians living in Europe for example. I am also aware that there are Christians in Africa and Asia and even sometimes in Eastern Europe that experience persecution. What attitude should they embrace when it comes to dealing with their enemies? What attitude should any Christian embrace if it were to experience such opposition from society in the future?

1. The Teaching of Jesus About Loving One's Enemies (vv. 27-31)

Christians are meant to be good citizens, moral people, persons that are able to show in everyday life the character of Christ in their thinking, actions, feelings, attitudes, because they are governed by the Holy Spirit who helps them understand the Scripture in a very personal and relevant way. So is it really possible for these good people to have enemies? Jesus is convinced that it is possible.

But how should Christians answer to their enemies? Christians represent the Kingdom of God. And that is why, in a sense, the answer to their enemies is the answer of the Kingdom. According to Jesus the Kingdom of God should answer with love, goodness, blessings and prayer. Also, those who are part of God's Kingdom shouldn't try to get revenge. They should do the opposite of what might have been expected of them and of what the World would do in a similar situation, because though they live in the World, they aren't of the World. They are of God's Kingdom. He is the one who defends their rights and he is the one who is going to revenge them. But until that time they should represent the Kingdom accordingly. So it is not enough for a Christian to refrain from hostile acts, he must love his enemies whoever they may be and whatever their actions.

N. T. Wright observes that: "The kingdom that Jesus preached and lived was all about a glorious, uproarious, absurd generosity. Think of the best thing you can do for the worst person, and go ahead and do it. Think of what you'd really like someone to do for you, and do it for them.

Think of the people to whom you are tempted to be nasty, and lavish generosity on them instead.”¹⁰

What Jesus wants to emphasize in his teaching is that Christians cannot be selective in manifesting their love. They must love all people in the same way their Lord and Master does. And if the standard established by Jesus seems to be too high to be reached, then the new rule or principle that governs all life would be: “Do to others as you would have them do to you.”¹¹

2. The Arguments of Jesus for Loving One's Enemies (vv. 32-36)

One argument for loving one's enemies is that the disciples of Jesus must be different from sinners and they must surpass sinners in their way of life. Even people who own no allegiance to God practice some virtues. They love those who love them. They know to repay good deeds done to them. They lend to those in need if they can be sure of getting their money back or perhaps rely on getting loans in return. If Christians are doing these things they are doing no more than the World does. That is why they should constantly ask themselves whether they are doing anything more than sinners do in similar circumstances.

Another argument would be that the disciples must think of a greater reward. In these days, and it seems that things weren't any different back then, people are seeking their own interest and they are driven by the desire of making profit. What benefits does one have from loving his enemies, from being always good with others, or from lending money without expecting any interest? Most people would answer: none. Yet Jesus says to his disciples not to expect to receive anything in exchange for their love, goodness and lending without interest. When his disciples live like that, Jesus tells them that their reward will be great. So there is something to receive in exchange after all. But the very important detail is that the reward doesn't consist of acts of gratitude from the recipients of their benefaction, the reward comes not from the World, as the sinners expect but rather God rewards them, for they are the people of his Kingdom. If he “*he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked*” he sure is kind to those who expect nothing from the World, but constantly rely on him.

10 Nicholas Thomas Wright, *Luke for Everyone* (London: SPCK, 2004), 73.

11 Also see Romans 12.14, 17-21.

One last argument provided in the text for loving one's enemies is that those who are part of God's Kingdom should be like their Heavenly Father. Not expecting anything in exchange for love, goodness, helping those in need, demonstrates an attitude appreciated by God. Such behaviour is proof that one is a child of God. In fact being a child of God is the ultimate reward that they could achieve. And what is even more important to observe is that this kind of attitude is expected from Christians, because they are regarded as the "*children of the Most High*". As it is in the United Kingdom where certain attitudes, certain behaviour and certain deeds are expected from the members of the British Royal Family, in correspondence to their rank, so it is expected from Christians as "*children of the Most High*" to be like their Father in all respect. That is why Jesus comes with another rule or principle that governs all life: "*Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.*"

3. Hindrances in Applying the Teaching of Jesus About Loving One's Enemies (vv. 37-38)

Our text closes with two very interesting verses that seem to have nothing to do with the discussion regarding the love manifested towards one's enemies as members of the Kingdom of God. Yet at a closer look these verses seem to play a very important role in the argument and have a very important message: "Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven. Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you."¹²

What could hinder believers from applying the teaching of Jesus about loving their enemies? The answer lies exactly in these two verses. Christians are not able to apply Jesus' teaching if somehow they become *the enemy*. If you think you can judge other people and if you find pleasure in condemning other people, then probably you became an enemy to some. But isn't it wiser to avoid becoming an enemy? That is why it is better not to judge and not to condemn. Instead be ready to forgive – which in this particular case means to release from obligation – and be concerned to do charity and give to others from your own possessions. In this way

12 Luke 6.37-38.

Christ can be shown to the World and those of the World receive the chance to encounter Jesus. Those who are part of God's Kingdom must love their enemies in order not to allow themselves to become enemies to others, to those who must be invited to join the Kingdom.

Loving one's enemies is truly the sign of cultivating virtues for those who are part of the Kingdom of God. In the words of Andrew Fiala "forgiveness and related Christian virtues – such as love, mercy, tolerance, and peacefulness – are virtues that are important for living well in community with others... The idea of forgiving one's enemies is related to the strange idea of loving your enemies."¹³ In the same time it is a genuine sign of integrity. According to Jesus loving one's enemies is directly linked with abandoning the possibility of revenge or retribution (v. 29), with exaggerated charity and self-denial (v. 30),¹⁴ with making financial risky decisions in order to come the aid of others (vv. 34-35). This is not the way of the World. To the World the principles and the way of life promoted by Jesus are unheard of and absurd. This is the way of God's Kingdom and those who are part of it prove their integrity and their allegiance to Jesus. They become free from cultural norms, social conflicts, greed, and hatred; they are freed from the ways of the World. Jesus and the Kingdom of God bring the freedom of sharing genuine love to all people, even to those who have proved to be enemies.

4. Is it Really Possible to Love One's Enemies?

Richard Wurmbrand was a Romanian Jewish atheist who became a Christian between the two World Wars. He devoted his life to God and became a Lutheran minister in Bucharest. He started a ministry of evangelism among Jewish people in the capital city of Romania. As a Jew life was hard for him during the Nazi occupation of Romania, but it was even harder after the communists came to power. After King Michael the 1st the last ruling monarch of Romania, was forced into exile by the communists in 1948, terror unleashed over many Christians

13 Andrew Fiala, *What Would Jesus Really Do? The Power and Limits of Jesus' Moral Teachings* (Lanham, Boulder, New York, Toronto, Plymouth, UK: Rowan & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2007), 41.

14 The text is probably referring here to someone begging or being robbed on the road. Richard A. Burridge, *Imitating Jesus. An Inclusive Approach to New Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids Michigan / Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 269.

in Romania. Wurmbrand started working in the underground church, spreading Christian literature and Bibles to the Russian soldiers stationed in Bucharest, and he was holding Bible study meetings in his home. Because he spoke publicly against the communist party, on the 29th of February 1948, on his way to church, he was kidnapped from the street by the secret police. He was convicted as an enemy of the state and was kept in different prisons and labour camps for 15 years. After his release he managed to leave Romania together with his family for the United States of America.

In 2006 in a context of a national survey which had the purpose to establish the 100 greatest Romanians from different fields, he made it into the top 5 greatest Romanians. He wrote many books and many of them became best sellers. *Tortured for Christ* is one of them, a book in which he describes some of the unspeakable tortures endured by him and other fellow Christians in the communist prisons. It is impressive how he managed to share the Gospel even in prison and even with officers of the secret police. But even more impressive are the stories told about others believers who shared his ordeal. A very moving story is the one of a Christian man who remained anonymous. Richard Wurmbrand writes about him: "When one Christian was sentenced to death, he was allowed to see his wife before being executed. His last words to his wife were, 'You must know that I die loving those who kill me. They don't know what they do and my last request of you is to love them, too. Don't have bitterness in your heart because they killed your beloved one. We will meet in heaven.' These words impressed the officer of the secret police who attended the discussion between the two. He later told me the story in prison where he had been sent for becoming a Christian."¹⁵

The simple truth of this story is that even the most wicked and evil of enemies can encounter Jesus and can become children of God if they first encounter people who are part of God's Kingdom and who are ready to share the love of Christ with their neighbours, whoever those neighbours might be.

15 Richard Wurmbrand, *Tortured for Christ* (Penrith, Australia: Stephanus Publications, 1998), 39.

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