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Love for one's enemies: the teaching and example of St Silouan the Athonite

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22nd International Ecumenical Conference on Orthodox Spirituality

BLESSED ARE THE PEACEMAKERS

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di Sr MAGDALENE di Maldon

Many patristic commentaries speak of the Beatitudes as a sequence of progressive stages. Our beatitude is far along the list. Likewise, love for one's enemies is high up on the ladder of love. The monk Silouan lived and taught this love to a rare degree. Archimandrite Sophrony, his disciple, emphasises that while what his elder teaches echoes the past tradition, he sheds fresh light on Christ's already 'new' commandment.

'They shall be called the children of God.' Preaching peace as the Church does will indeed make the preachers like the Son of God, in His pain as well as His glory. Fr. Sophrony reminds us that 'those who truly preach Christ's peace should never lose sight of Golgotha'. [...] "'Love your enemies" is not accepted by the world, and so all down the centuries the world has persecuted the true Church. Sad to say, St Silouan experienced this in his own monastery, even though he practised what he spoke of, and could not be accused of hypocrisy: On one occasion the cause was a lack of discernment in the preacher. 'The Lord said, "Blessed are the peacemakers." And so I thought to myself, "Part of my time I will live in silence, and part devote to peacemaking." So I went and sat with Brother x., [...] who was agitated in mind; [...] I began to exhort him to forgive and live in peace with all men. For a while he bore with me but presently he rose up against me so fiercely that I fled his cell, almost running from him [...]. And I realised that one must seek the will of God [...] instead of thinking up spiritual feats for oneself. At other times he was accused of disloyalty to the persecuted Russian Church when he spoke of praying for her enemies. "'The enemy persecutes the Holy Church," you say. "Am I then to love him?" My answer is this: "Your poor soul has not come to know God, [...] and how longingly He looks for all men to repent and be saved. The [...] Holy Spirit [...] teaches the soul to love her enemies." [...] Our one thought must be that all should be saved. The soul sorrows for her enemies and prays for them because they have strayed from the truth and their faces are set towards hell. That is love for our enemies.

Thus, St Silouan knew that even in a monastic community there can be hostility. 'Living in a Community, more often we lose grace because we have not learned to love our brethren according to the Lord's commandment. If your brother offend against you, and you feel anger, or you condemn or detest him, you will for that grace has fled and peace departed. To have peace of soul we must school ourselves to love the man who has offended us [...]. There can be no peace for the soul unless she pray the Lord with all her might for the gift of love towards all men. 'He who loves not his enemies will never find peace, even though he were to be set down in paradise.

St Silouan saw Christ in a vision when he was a novice; he experienced Christ's humble Love with all his being. He began to pray for the entire world as for himself. In this state the soul does not distinguish between friend and foe. 'If we love our enemies there will be no place in our souls for pride, for in Christ-like love no one ranks above another.' The more darkness someone is living in, the more the grace-filled person will pity him. This is how Divine love is reflected in the human soul. 'He who will not love his enemies cannot come to know the Lord and the sweetness of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit teaches us to love our enemies, so that the soul pities them as if they were her own children. When the soul stills her passion and grows humble, the Lord gives her His grace, and then she prays for her enemies as for herself; and sheds scalding tears for the whole world.

'The man who loves his enemies soon comes to know the Lord in the Holy Spirit, but of the man who does not love his enemies I have no wish to write. Yet he is to be pitied, for he is a torment to himself and to others, and will not know the Lord.

Christ and the apostles teach that love of our brethren is the test of how real and how deep is our love for God. St. Silouan shows us that the test of our knowledge of Truth is our attitude towards those who offend us, or are cruel to the Church. 'There are people who desire the destruction, the torment in hellfire of their enemies, or the enemies of the Church. They think like this because they have not learned divine love.' Thus, in the confusion of ecclesiastical groupings and schisms, love of enemies becomes also an ecclesiological criterion: the persecuted Church which prays for her enemies must be the true Church, rather than those with false zeal 'not according to knowledge' who organise uprisings and even wars against the enemies of truth. Knowledge of God comes from love of enemies and leads to love of enemies; the two are inseparable.

St Silouan says that to entrust oneself to the Providence of God is the way to keep inviolable peace within. Indeed, inner peace is the only inviolable peace, and from it comes outward peace. Thoughts determine lives. At the same time, St Silouan shows us that whatever the outward circumstances, inner peace is preserved if we 'attach ourselves to the will of God'. 'If a man murmurs against his fate, saying, "This is not right, and that is ill," he will never know peace in his soul, even though he fast and spend much time in prayer.' This is not fatalism, because, as St John Chrysostom puts it, 'resignation is not faith'. Nor is it a quietist or yogic detachment. St Silouan continually reminds us of our spiritual warfare, harder than any physical battle.~ He prayed for changes to happen: for people to be rescued, to be healed, to be saved from hell. Prayer makes the difference between fatalism and faith. But as he says, it is not simply the quantity of prayer that counts. 'Though a man pray much, and fast, but has not love for his enemies, he can know no peace of soul. And I should not even be able to speak of this, had not the Holy Spirit taught me love.'

St Silouan often iterates the link between peace, the love of one's enemies and humility. 'Where there is pride there cannot be grace, and if we lose grace we also lose both love of God and assurance in prayer. The soul is then tormented by evil thoughts and does not understand that she must humble herself and love her enemies, for there is no other way to please God.' 18 'The soul of the humble man is like the sea. Throw a stone into the sea - for a moment it will ruffle the surface, and then sink to the bottom. Thus do afflictions disappear down in the heart of the humble man because the strength of the Lord is with him.' St Silouan understood the power of self-abasement more clearly after the Lord taught him to 'keep his mind in hell and despair not'. When he received this word from the Lord, he felt peace and relief (he

often says 'rest') in his soul. The humble are not ruffled by ill treatment: no one can put them any lower than they deem themselves to be.

Once again this degree of self-abasement is 'strong meat', not for babes. But at all stages, 'If one among you has lost grace and things go hard with him, let him repent, and the Lord will give him His peace. If a people or a nation are in tribulation, all must repent, and then God will set everything right.' O Lord, vouchsafe unto us the gift of the Holy Spirit, that we may perceive Thy glory, and live on earth in peace and love. And let there be neither malice, nor wars nor enemies, but may love alone reign, and there will be no need of armies, or prisons, and life will be easy for everyone on earth. This is the nearest he comes to suggesting a way out of military conflicts. His solution is not on the earthly or psychological level, although it will have effect on every plane. He believed firmly that the solution to all ills is the keeping of Christ's commandments. (As a young man he undertook military service, and as a monk he did not enter into political dialogues.)

Love of enemies is not natural for fallen man; it is a gift of grace, and grace is increased when we bless those who curse us. 'The grace of God is not in the man who does not love his enemies. [...] O Lord, as Thou Thyself didst pray for Thine enemies, so teach us, too, by Thy Holy Spirit, to love our enemies. We can all begin to practise this love. 'If you cannot love, then at least do not revile or curse your enemies, and things will already be better; but if a man curse and abuse his enemies, it is plain that an evil spirit lives in him, and if he does not repent, when he dies he will go to the place where evil spirits dwell. May the Lord preserve every soul from such adversity. 'I beseech you, put this to the test. When a man affronts you or brings dishonour on your head, or takes what is yours, or persecutes the Church, pray to the Lord, saying: "O Lord. [...] have pity on Thy servants, and turn their hearts to repentance," and you will be aware of grace in your soul. To begin with, constrain your heart to love enemies, and the Lord, seeing your good will, will help you in all things, and experience itself will show you the way. But the man who thinks with malice of his enemies has not God's love within him, and does not know God. [...] When you can love your enemies - know that a great measure of the grace of God dwells in you, though I do not say perfect grace as yet, but sufficient for salvation.

'The Lord bade us love our enemies, and the man who loves his enemies is like to the Lord. But we can only love our enemies by the grace of the Holy Spirit, and so as soon as anyone affronts you, pray to God for him, and then you will preserve peace in your soul, and the grace of God.'²⁵ The 'but' merits study that we have not the time for here: the commandment is not possible to keep without Christ; to obey is to love.

We are called to imitate Christ. 'Christ prayed for them that were crucifying him: "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do [Luke 23:34]." [...] And we, if we wish to preserve grace, must pray for our enemies. If someone is able to pray for his offender, and thus include him in his heart, no one else would be excluded. Thus love for one's enemies implies universal love. St Silouan spent decades weeping in prayer for all mankind as for himself, demonstrating that someone who reaches 'the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ' loves with His immutable love.