

Christ's Commandment of Hatred (Lk 14:26) in the Theology of Archimandrite Sophrony (Sakharov)

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The association of hatred with the message of the Gospel is, on the whole, understandably neglected in the history of Christian thought. However, the need to address the issue is brought sharply to the fore by several passages in the New Testament, in particular the commandment in Lk 14:26 to hate father, mother, wife, children, brothers, sisters, and one's own life in order to become a disciple of Christ. This passage has a long history of interpretation in patristic and Byzantine sources, the main contours of which will be set out presently. Following that, the discussion will turn to an influential contemporary ascetic and theologian of the Eastern Orthodox tradition, Archimandrite Sophrony (Sakharov; 1896-1993), who in a striking and unique way situates this passage at the heart of his ascetic theory.¹ Christ's call to hatred, most especially the call to hatred of one's own life/soul/self (ψυχή), is interpreted counter-intuitively as a call to divine love. This idea is usually articulated in Father Sophrony's writings by the expression, "love to the point of self-hatred." His appropriation of Lk 14:26 as central to his concept of the Christian life will be discussed. It will be concluded that the function and purpose of Sophrony's often startling if not discomfiting exegesis is not so much to scandalize his readers as to draw them towards an understanding of the seriousness of the Christian vocation, a calling that requires a love that is neither superficial nor abstract, but concrete, demanding, and pre-eminently self-sacrificial.

Luke 14:26 in Patristic and Byzantine sources

The immediate difficulty of Lk 14:26 is that it appears to contradict the much more frequent calls of the Gospel to love. More particularly, when one lines up the command to "love your enemies" in Luke 6:35 with this verse, it appears wholly nonsensical: Hate your close ones? Love your enemies? Augustine addresses this problem in his *Commentary on the Sermon on the Mount*. There he notes that the call to hatred is especially upsetting for new converts eager to ascend to the heights of keeping all the Lord's commandments, since it seems to contradict the call to brotherly love; thus he attempts a resolution:

¹ Archimandrite Sophrony (Sakharov) was a Russian artist who in 1926, following a brief sojourn in Paris, became an Athonite monk. While at Athos Sophrony became a close disciple of Silouan the Athonite, publishing his writings while composing his own theological works. In 1959, Sophrony founded an Orthodox monastery in Essex, England. Major works in English include his *St Silouan the Athonite* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1999); *His Life is Mine* (Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 1977); *We Shall See Him As He Is* (Kodiak, AK: St Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, 2006), and *On Prayer* (Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 1996). Much of his correspondence has been published in Russian. His theological legacy has been assessed in a number of works: see especially N. Sakharov, *I Love Therefore I Am* (Crestwood: SVS Press, 2003) and Archimandrite Zacharias (Zacharou), *Christ, Our Way and Our Life: A Presentation of the Theology of Archimandrite Sophrony* (Waymart, PA: STS Press, 2003).

Whoever wishes to prepare himself now for the life of that kingdom [of love] must not hate *people* but those earthly relationships through which the present life is sustained, the temporary life that begins at birth and ends with death. Whoever does not hate this necessity does not yet love that other life in which there will be no condition of birth and death, the condition that makes marriages natural on earth.²

Augustine's sharp rejection of the idea that the command implies hatred of people is fundamental to all Christian interpreters of this verse. But while Augustine lays the emphasis of his interpretation on hating the natural cycle of birth and death for the sake of the supernatural kingdom, others link the need for such "hatred" to the more immediate, practical and ascetical life. As Basil the Great comments:

The Father did not send the only-begotten Son, the living God, to judge the world but to save the world. True to himself and faithful to the will of the good God his Father, he points to a doctrine whereby we may be made worthy of becoming his disciples with his severe decree. He says, "If any man comes to me and does hate his father and mother, and his wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple." This hatred teaches the virtue of piety by withdrawing us from distractions and does not lead us to devise hurtful schemes against one another.³

The immediate benefits of this activity of "hatred" are what preoccupy Basil.

Such a meaning has practical application for John Chrysostom as well. Paraphrasing Christ's command, Chrysostom writes, "when one desires to be loved more than I am, hate him in this respect. For this ruins both the beloved himself, and the lover."⁴ He continues with an examination of the lines "hate...your own life also," making the argument that if one does indeed despise one's life, one is truly doing the part of someone who loves it.

We consider as a final example the words of the later Byzantine mystic, Symeon the New Theologian, who combines elements from both Luke and Matthew in speaking of "forsaking" or "leaving" rather than "hating":

I heard his voice speaking to all without distinction: "he who does not leave father and mother and brothers and all that he possesses and take up his cross and follow me is not worthy of me." I learned from Scripture and from experience itself that the cross comes at the end for no other reason than that we must endure trials and tribulations and finally voluntary death itself. In times past, when heresies prevailed, many chose death through martyrdom and various tortures. Now, when we through the grace of Christ live in a time of profound and perfect peace, we learn for certain that cross and death consist in nothing else than the complete putting to death of self-will. He who pursues his own will, however slightly, will never be able to observe the law of Christ the Savior.⁵

² Augustine, *Commentary on the Sermon on the Mount* 1.15 (PL 34:1250; trans. FC 11:60-61).

³ Basil the Great, *On Baptism* 1.4 (PG 31:1521D-1524A; trans. FC 32:223-224).

⁴ John Chrysostom, *Commentary on Matthew*, 35.3 (PG 57:407).

⁵ Symeon the New Theologian, *Discourses* 20.1 SNTD, 232.

Associating the death, renunciation, and “hatred” of one’s own life with denying the will has been a common trope in Eastern Christian ascetical writings. This reading, along with those that emphasize the need to prioritize Christ over everything else, are all readings that Archimandrite Sophrony inherited naturally from the Athonite environment so intrinsic to his formation as monk and theologian. However, what is new here is the centrality that this call to “hatred” was to hold in his ascetical theory. In what follows, Sophrony’s understanding of the verse, along with his reasoning behind its importance, will be unpacked.

Sophrony’s use of Luke 14:26

We will now turn to the commandment of hatred in Sophrony’s writings. While most Christian interpreters over the centuries have not paid particular attention to this verse, dwelling on it only to provide an acceptable and orthodox reading, Sophrony uses the summons to hate as a proof text for the whole Christian message.

He Who said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life,” gave us commandments like this one: “if any man come to me, and hate not his father and mother and wife and children and brethren and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple.” These words show us WHO this is...If Jesus Christ were not God this commandment would be enough to render unacceptable all the rest of the Gospel.⁶

Sophrony accepts it as a given that hatred for its own sake is anti-Christian and therefore “unacceptable.” But on the lips of Christ, the God-man, such a call takes on completely new dimensions, providing proof, in Sophrony’s view, of Christ’s divinity. The embrace of what he elsewhere terms “holy hate”⁷ is nothing but a gateway to Christ-like love:

Starting with renouncement, rejection and “hate,” according to Christ’s words...the Christian concludes by wanting to lay down his life for Christ and for them that love him and them that hate him. And so, spurning all things, breaking with all things, “hating” everything, the Christian receives from God the gift of everlasting spiritual love for each and all. Abandoning everything, renouncing everything, he enters into possession of riches that are incomparably greater, more real and everlasting.⁸

The commandment, in other words, has to do with a radical self-renunciation, without which we “cannot be Christ’s disciples.” The power of this injunction is such for Sophrony that it is described as the summit of all the commandments:

The Christian ascetic, guided by Christ’s commandments, inevitably finds himself confronted by the injunction, “If any man hate not his own life, he cannot be my disciple.” When the Christian in his ardent desire for the perfection commanded of us accepts in his deep soul even this bidding by the Lord Himself, there begins an

⁶ Sophrony, *On Prayer*, 30.

⁷ Sophrony, *We Shall See Him*, 124.

⁸ Sophrony, *St Silouan the Athonite*, 235.

experience of which it can justifiably be said that it leads to the last stage accessible to man.⁹

For Sophrony, what is most significant about this command is hatred of one's own self or life. Having severed earthly ties for Christ's sake, the rebellious ego remains the final hurdle. In order to conform one's entire self to Christ, selfish rebellion must be put down through repentance:

In order to be re-born in God it is necessary for us to feel appalled at ourselves as we are—to loathe the odious, ungodly passion of pride in us that drove us in disgrace from the Kingdom of the Father of lights. Salvation lies in Christ's commandment to love God and hate one's own life.¹⁰

The process is described similarly elsewhere, in a chapter from *We Shall See Him as He Is*, entitled "Love—to the point of self-hatred":

The normal consequence of keeping the Lord's commandments is an extreme reduction of our self—a self-emptying. Without sincere recognition that we are indeed devils incarnate in our fall, we shall never arrive at fullness of repentance. Through total repentance we break loose from the deadly embrace of selfish individualism and begin to contemplate the divine universality of Christ, Who "loved us unto the end." When we hate ourselves for the evil that lives in us, then it is that the boundless horizons of the love commanded of us are revealed.¹¹

The unsparing severity of Sophrony's approach springs from an unstinting belief that within the commandment of self-hatred is contained the mystery of living out the sacrificial love demanded of the Christian. It is essentially, as he puts it, a commandment to love expressed in "terrible words."¹² The two, love for God and hatred for one's own self, are held together as inseparable elements on the path to salvation. While Fr Sophrony insists on this ideal of self-hatred, he realizes how difficult it can be to attain. He saw it most fully realized in his spiritual father, Silouan, but saw also that hardly anyone measured up to this extraordinary man. Sophrony recalls of the saint:

Many who had run eagerly to the Staretz [Silouan] for guidance afterwards fell away because they found themselves unable to live in accordance with what he said. His counsel was simple, quiet and kind; but to follow it one has to be as unsparing of oneself as was the Staretz. That firmness of purpose is required which the Lord demands of his followers—a resolution amounting to self-hatred.¹³

⁹ Sophrony, *St Silouan*, 242.

¹⁰ Sophrony, *On Prayer*, 53.

¹¹ Sophrony, *We Shall See Him*, 145.

¹² *Idem*, 136.

¹³ Sophrony, *St Silouan*, 76.

He ends Part 1 of the book with similar sentiments: “The Staretz’s message is a gentle, often affectionate one, healing the soul, but to heed it requires great and ardent resolution—to the point of self-hatred.”¹⁴

The inherent difficulty of living up to this command leads Sophrony to a striking conclusion. One can never really live as a Christian, he explains, since the state of fulfilling this commandment of self-hatred—and thereby finding divine love—occurs only rarely among even the greatest Christians. Therefore, in the end one can only die a Christian; that is, true Christian life is the life of the age to come.¹⁵

We have seen, then, that the idea of self-hatred is central to Sophrony’s ascetic thought and his conceptualization of the Christian life. But what are the reasons for this? The first is experiential. In several passages of his spiritual autobiography *We Shall See Him As He Is*, it clearly emerges that his lived experience as a Christian ascetic directly influenced his devotion to this text. In one place he writes:

I spent long periods without reasoning. Thoughts would occur to me in discussion with other people but not when I was alone before God. I did not theologize, I did not analyze myself. I did not cling to the states of mind that I experienced, although I dwelt in a formless mental sphere. Could this be labeled insanity? But when the “madness” left me, only then did I comprehend the irreparable loss to my spiritual being. Through that prayer the meaning had partially been revealed to me of Christ’s words, “If any man come to me, and hate not... his own life... he cannot be my disciple.”¹⁶

Again:

Here is my theme song: that through repentance granted to me, even to the point of hate for myself, I unexpectedly experienced a wondrous peace, and uncreated Light enveloped me, penetrating within, making me, too, light like itself, giving me to live the Kingdom of the God of Love—the Kingdom of which “there shall be no end.”¹⁷

Ascetic experience led Sophrony to prize the text of Lk 14:26 dearly and return to it time and again. He considered the true understanding and acceptance of this text as a sign of grace-filled experience in the Christian. It was only through the touch of divine love that the meaning of the text could be assimilated:

Without such experience [of divine love] no man born of woman can understand the seemingly paradoxical Gospel commandment: “love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you,” but “hate” your kin and brethren. In our urge to apprehend Christ’s commandments in their global entirety, again and again we return to these two seemingly conflicting injunctions. The inconsistency is eliminated once it is given us to experience both these states. Then the Spirit bears witness in us that death is vanquished, and we anticipate the grace of our promised resurrection.¹⁸

¹⁴ Sophrony, *St Silouan*, 268.

¹⁵ *Idem*, 242.

¹⁶ Sophrony, *We Shall See Him*, 145.

¹⁷ *Idem*, 148.

¹⁸ *Idem*, 147.

However, in addition to his own personal experience, I think there is another reason that lies behind the centrality of this text in Fr Sophrony's theology. Living in the West for much of his life and serving as a spiritual director to many, he was not always impressed by the level of seriousness with which Christians considered their vocations as Christians. He writes, for example, that "what monks acquired after decades of weeping, our contemporaries think to receive after a brief interval—sometimes even in a few hours of pleasant 'theological' discussion."¹⁹ Christ's commandment to hatred of kin, brethren, and self in order to be a disciple, because of its unequivocally harsh tone, served as an ideal "wake-up call" for contemporary Christians. It also provided a convenient corrective to the prevailing attitudes of self-obsession that he came across so often in his pastoral ministry. By deliberately and repeatedly choosing a Gospel text so stark as to eliminate any hazy or cozy notions of what it means to follow Christ, Sophrony challenges every Christian to take note and approach his or her Christian vocation with renewed intensity and vigor. In doing so, perhaps even without realizing it, Sophrony contributed to the history of exegesis in Eastern Orthodoxy by taking a more or less peripheral biblical verse in the hermeneutical tradition of the East, and planting it at the very heart of Christian living.

¹⁹ Sophrony, *On Prayer*, 92.