



MCDSARE: 2023 International Multidisciplinary Scientific Conference on the Dialogue between Sciences & Arts, Religion & Education

THE CARE OF THE SUFFERING IN LUKE-ACTS

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Abstract

The Gospel of Luke uniquely portrays Jesus Christ as a figure of profound compassion and empathy, emphasizing His solidarity with the marginalized and his unwavering commitment to ensuring a dignified life for all, even at the cost of His own life. This Gospel, along with the Book of Acts, highlights a special concern for the suffering and the sick, underscoring themes of mercy, kindness, and social justice more than any other New Testament text. Through parables such as the Good Samaritan and the Rich Man and Lazarus, Luke vividly illustrates the call to love one's neighbor. The article explores the theme by addressing the following points: (1) Between the annunciation and the synagogue of Nazareth, which sets the stage for Jesus' mission and His proclamation of social justice; (2) The Sermon on the Plain, which emphasizes radical love and mercy; (3) The Time of the Visitation, highlighting Jesus' engagement with the marginalized; and (4) The Kingdom of Mercy in Acts, portraying the early Christian community's commitment to inclusivity, generosity, and communal living as a model for contemporary believers. Overall, Luke's Gospel and Acts offer a compelling vision of Christian discipleship rooted in compassion, justice, and the transformative power of the Holy Spirit. St. Luke's writings continue to inspire and challenge believers to embody Christ's love and mercy in their daily lives, profoundly impacting the world around them.

Keywords: Mercy; Neighborly Love; Gospel of Luke; Acts of the Apostles; Visitation; Sermon on the Plain; Social Justice;

1. INTRODUCTION

The Gospel of Luke stands out for its profound portrayal of Jesus Christ as a compassionate and empathetic figure. Unlike other Gospels, Luke emphasizes Jesus' suffering with the marginalized and His commitment to a dignified life for all, even at the cost of His own life. His interactions with the downtrodden highlight His deep understanding and compassion. Both Luke's Gospel and Acts demonstrate a particular concern for the suffering and sick. Luke's emphasis on mercy, kindness, and social justice is unparalleled in the New Testament. His parables, like the Good Samaritan and the Rich Man and Lazarus, powerfully illustrate the call to love one's neighbor.



In this symposium on “Orthodox Theology and the Ministry of the Neighbor,” the Lucan Diptych presents not only Christ and His disciples as examples but also a new worldview that demands radical change in believers' relationships with others. It challenges them to move beyond charity towards solidarity and advocacy for the oppressed. Both the Gospel and Acts portray God as a merciful Father who sends His Son to establish His Kingdom among those who believe and imitate His acts of mercy.

Luke's emphasis on the Holy Spirit's role in empowering believers to continue Jesus' mission is evident throughout Acts. The early Christian community, as depicted by Luke, is characterized by inclusivity, generosity, and communal living. This vision of a Spirit-filled community serves as a model for contemporary Christians, urging them to live out their faith in tangible, transformative ways.

Luke's Gospel and Acts offer a compelling vision of Christian discipleship rooted in compassion, justice, and the transformative power of the Holy Spirit. St. Luke's writings continue to inspire and challenge believers to embody Christ's love and mercy in their daily lives, making a profound impact on the world around them. All biblical quotations in English are from the New American Standard Bible, 1995 edition.

1. BETWEEN THE ANNUNCIATION AND THE SYNAGOGUE OF NAZARETH

At the beginning of the establishment of the Kingdom of God, Jesus solemnly commits himself before God and his brethren in the synagogue at Nazareth to walk according to the Scriptures (Lk 4:16-22). He proposes to function as an instrument of God “to bring good news to the afflicted... to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to captives, and freedom to prisoners; to proclaim the favorable year of the Lord” (Is 61:1-2). For Jesus, this reading had been fulfilled because when he had decided to walk accordingly, following its message, especially because the words of the prophet are always called to be made concrete in life. And in the Gospel, Jesus Christ puts these words into action.

This text has a strong link to the concept of mercy. It is found not only in the Book of Isaiah, where the promise of divine redemption is described as a fruit of mercy (see Is 63:7-9.16), but also in the Megalyrnarion of Luke 1:46-55, especially in verses 50-55, in which St. Luke presents the son of Mary not as any other prophet, but as the bearer of God's mercy in favor of his people who are oppressed and obfuscated by the power of sin and perdition. Thus, we read what Our Lady says:

“...And His mercy is upon generation after generation toward those who fear Him... He has given help to Israel His servant, in remembrance of His mercy, As He spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and his offspring forever.” (Lk 1:50.54-55).

The term mercy (ἔλεος) appears twice in the hymn (v. 50 and 54) and is one of the most prominent features of God in Psalms. Mercy renders the Hebrew stems *hsd* and *rhm*. It highlights God's faithfulness to men and the covenant he made with them.¹ The Gospel also registers the hymn of the priest Zechariah, known as the Evlogetos (“Blessed be the Lord” in Lk 1:67-79) in which it is stated that God's saving work is due to his great mercy; for the Lord does not go out to meet those who are deemed “worthy” according to human conventions of their own, but assists and rescues those who sit “in darkness and in the shadow of death” and wait for Christ to shine his light upon them and guide their steps along the path of peace (Lk 1:79).

2. THE SERMON ON THE PLAIN

The teachings about the Kingdom of mercy find their peak in the Sermon on the Plain, where St. Luke reports Jesus' first great sermon to his disciples (Lk 6:17-49), especially in the call “Be merciful, as your Father is merciful” (Lk 6:36), in which Jesus proclaims the principle of imitating God (*Imitatio Dei, μίμησις τοῦ θεοῦ*) and summons the listeners to live according to this teaching.²

1 See for instance Eze 39:25-39 and Jer 31:1-34. For mercy in the psalms see Ps 33:22; 50:3; 97:3; 100:5; 103:17 among many others.

² See AYUCH. *Sozialgerechtes Handeln Als Ausdruck Einer Eschatologischen Vision: Zum Zusammenhang von Offenbarungswissen Und Sozialethik in Den Lukanischen Schlüsselreden*. Oros Verlag, 1998, 211-212.

This praise of mercy is clearly understood from the beginning of the sermon, with the beatitudes, where Jesus proclaims his Father's decision to give the Kingdom to his poor people who are hungry and weeping. So, happiness as expressed in these beatitudes has an eschatological character, it comes from the future since it is specific to the time of the establishment of the Kingdom. But that is not all. Jesus also speaks of a happiness that begins here and now, as confirmed by the participles and present verbs of the enunciation (ἔστιν, πεινῶντες, κλαίοντες) and the temporal adverb "now" (νῦν). Perhaps one of the most striking features of this text is that the blessed people are just those whom any wise man of this world would consider unfortunate: the poor, the weeping, and the hungry ones. With his proclamation, Jesus challenges the wise of this world and gives a new conception of what is success and failure in life. Jesus tells his listeners: we must see life with new eyes, with the eyes of the Kingdom that I announce to you. The Beatitudes present a wisdom in which the principles of classical Greek thought are reversed. An interaction is proposed between the prophetic denunciation and the psalmist's plea for the well-being of the poorest.

Besides, in verses 37-38 we read that God will not judge those who do not judge and will give to those who give. Based on an image characteristic of the farmers' payday, in which the land workers used to receive a small part of what they harvested, Jesus announces that such a reward will be granted that exceeds all expectations because of its abundance and generosity (cf. Lk 6:38). God the Father decided to bestow his "grace" (χάρις in Lk 6:32-34) as a "reward" (μισθός in Lk 6:23.35) through which believers can become sons and daughters of the Most High (cf. Lk 6:23.32-25).

With this new announcement, men receive a new condition of life as children of God to whom the doors of the heavenly dwelling are opened so that they behave in this life as those who are worthy to live in the house of the Father (see Lk 14:21 -23; 15:4-7). There is no escape from so much kindness and mercy. If men heed this divine call, they are committed to acting accordingly. Whoever accepts to be a son or daughter of the Most High must learn to behave like their Father. They must learn to forgive and transform a situation of humiliation and insults into an occasion for uttering a blessing and offer good works (see Lk 6:27-29). They must learn to give without expecting anything in return and to care for the poor, the hungry and the suffering ones. Obedience is implicit because the one who invites them to his house bears the title of "Father" and consequently, all those who enter his house receive the title of "children." The authority of the householder is thus clearly outlined. In such a situation, the guests must obey the rules of the one who is Master and Lord of his house and follow his example. In the book of Acts we find the Apostle Paul referring to this same idea when he speaks of God as the one who "builds the house" (ὁ δυνάμενος οἰκοδομῆσαι) and as the one who "can give inheritance" (ὁ δυνάμενος δοῦναι τὴν κληρονομίαν) to all those who are sanctified (see Acts 20:32).

3. THE TIME OF THE VISITATION

There are countless passages in Luke and Acts that are interpreted in light of the Sermon on the Plain. Let us first take a close passage: the resurrection of the son of the widow of Nain in Luke 7:11-17. There is no doubt that the widow represents in her situation every human being in need and poverty, especially after having lost her only son. The widow of Nain enters the scene in tears, feeling herself the victim of a terrible injustice, pursued by the injustice of death since she lost her husband and now where it hurts the most, with the loss of her only son. Faced with this dramatic scene, Jesus cannot help but intervene to save this woman. The crowd that witnessed his work testifies how to interpret this resurrection from faith. They glorify God and say: "A great prophet has arisen among us, and God has visited his people" (Lk 7:16). In the humble town of Nain, we see that the Kingdom of Mercy has begun to work on earth. Had Jesus Christ not passed by the widow's household, the culture of weakness and death would have reigned on them. Her young generation would have fallen to the power of death, and suffering and wailing would have possessed their hearts. Had Jesus not visited them, life would have been a synonym of injustice and oppression.³

3 See AYUCH. The Centurion and the Widow (Luke 7:1-17). Lucan Narrative and the Liberation of Man from Slavery and Poverty. In: Nassif, Bradley. *Festschrift in Honor of Professor Paul Nadim Tarazi*. Vol. 2. New York: Peter Lang, 2015, 37-43.

The Gospel of Luke presents the entire works of Jesus as God's visitation of men with all mercy and charity.⁴ This is the visitation (ἐπισκοπή, see Lk 19:44) of which Zechariah spoke in his hymn when he said, "Blessed is the Lord God of Israel because he has visited and redeemed his people... through the wombs of mercy of our God, which will make us visit a Light from above, in order to illuminate those who dwell in darkness and shadows of death and guide our steps in the path of peace" (Lk 1:68.78-79). What Zechariah proclaims with faith and hope will be fulfilled by Jesus throughout the Gospel, especially in the section of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem that extends for more than ten chapters from 9:51 to 19:48. On this journey Jesus is always "on the way" (ἐν τῇ ὁδῷ),⁵ that is, in the path of peace, the end of which is understood as the time of visitation (Lk 19: 44).

With the parable of the Good Samaritan Jesus takes up again the doctrine of mercy through a new literary genre (Lk 10:25-37).⁶ At the beginning of his journey to Jerusalem, Jesus points out the importance of acting with wisdom and discernment in favor of the needy in order to receive the inheritance of eternal life, which in other words is the Kingdom. The lawyer takes the role of a disciple and consults Jesus, considering him as a referent and teacher. The style adopted by Luke in this scene reminds us of the classic maieutic dialogues with which Socrates taught. The parable highlights the great difference between seeing and not doing and between seeing and doing. Two characters have bodily contact with the victim: the aggressors and the Samaritan, while two others only have eye contact with him: the priest and the Levite. The former are carried away by their feelings and desires. The other two do not react towards the other.⁷ Compassion and acting on it have made the Samaritan a neighbor. Blind observance of the Law and self-sufficiency harden the heart and make one despise a person in distress. This scene shows that a good life is only good when it is extended to those who are victims, weak and needy. The happiness of the individual is linked to the happiness of those who cross their path and especially those who go through a moment of unhappiness.

Jesus' listener clearly understands the Master's message and, therefore, does not hesitate to respond that the one who cares for the oppressed and needy by doing works of mercy is the true neighbor (Lk 10:37). Yes, says Jesus, only works of mercy correspond to your hope of entering the Kingdom.

In several scenes of the Gospel, it is reported that Jesus accepted to be invited to tables shared with publicans, that is to say, with the tax collectors of the empire.⁸ There are several testimonies in the rabbinical writings and in Philo of Alexandria about the injustices and abuses that these characters committed in the Palestine of the first century.⁹ For this reason, they were considered sinners and similar to criminals. When it was a question of payment, they were ready to use force and even torture.¹⁰ Hence the teachers of the Law and the Pharisees criticized Jesus for having shared tables with this sort of people.

⁴ See an alternative interpretation of the visitation in FITZMYER. *The Gospel According to Luke X-XXIV* (V.2). Vol. 28A. Doubleday & Company: New York, 1981, 1259.

⁵ See 9:57; 19:36 and also Lk 10:38; 13:22; 17:11; 19:28.

⁶ See BOVON. *L'évangile selon Saint Luc* (9, 51 - 14, 35). Genève, Suisse : Labor et Fides ; 1996, 83-84 and LÖNING. *Das Geschichtswerk des Lukas. Der Weg Jesu*. Kohlhammer: Stuttgart, 2006, 44-50.

⁷ LÖNING. „Die Tora als Weg zum ewigen Leben nach Lk 10,25-37“. In: Arnold Angenendt / Herbert Vorgrimler (Ed.), *Sie wandern von Kraft zu Kraft. Aufbrüche, Wege, Begegnungen. Festgabe für Bischof Reinhard Lettmann*. Butzon & Bercker: Kevelaer, 1993, 54.

⁸ See the symposium at Levi's house in Luke 5:29; the accusations of the Pharisees in 7:34 and 15:2 and the invitation of Zacchaeus in 19:1-7.

⁹ In the Mishna they are classified with murderers and robbers (see *Mishnah Nedarim* III, 6; *TB BQ* 113a). See similar texts in: JEREMIAS, *Jerusalén en tiempos de Jesús*, Madrid, Cristiandad 1977; p. 322-323 and SPERBER. "Tax Gatherers." *Encyclopaedia Judaica, Second Edition XIX*, Fred Skolnik, ed. Thomson Gale: Farmington Hills, 2007, 559).

¹⁰ Philo's testimony is found in *De Spec Leg III*, XXX-159-160. Among its lines you can read: "When some poor people in our country who owed these taxes fled for fear that intolerable punishments would be applied to them if they did not pay, a certain person who had received the position of tax collector had his people forcibly removed. wives, their children, and all their families, and with whippings, insults and all kinds of insults and ill-treatment he tried to get them to give information about the place where the fugitives had hidden or to pay in their place."

Jesus' response comes in the three parables of mercy in chapter 15 in which the lost is recovered: a shepherd recovers his lost sheep; a housewife finds her missing drachma and a father goes out to meet a son who returns home. The first two parables highlight the joy of finding what was lost while the third is the longest and speaks of the father's heartfelt emotion as he embraces and kisses his lost son and pays him the highest honors to celebrate his return (15:20-24). The older son portrays for his part the figure of the Pharisees who are zealous in fulfilling all the commands of their Father and who do not recognize the returning son as their brother but call him "that son of yours" (15:30). Jesus in eating with sinners and in telling this parable depicts a different option, that of the brother who not only fulfills the will of the Father, but also "faithfully reproduces the traits of the merciful father." Later the message of these parables will be synthesized by saying that the mission of the Son of Man on earth is to "seek and to save that which was lost" (Lk 19:10).

By sitting with sinners, Jesus proclaims the opening of the door to the Kingdom through divine mercy. However, it is important to emphasize that mercy is addressed purely and exclusively to those who repent and recognize that they are poor and humble. According to Luke's Gospel, God shows his clemency and forgiveness only to those who have placed all their trust in God. For the unjust, rich, powerful, and mendacious who love this world, both Jesus and God the Father - there is no difference between them in this - remain that roaring lion of Amos who condemns and destroys the rebellious (Amos 1:2; 3:8). This characteristic of divine mercy is present in many Gospel passages, including the parable of Lazarus and the rich man (Lk 16:19-31), the sermon of John the Baptist (Lk 3:7-18) and Jesus' judgment of the false leaders (Lk 20:18f and 45f).

4. THE KINGDOM OF MERCY IN ACTS

After the Pentecost event, the seeds of the Kingdom spread among the community of believers. The disciples of the Lord seated at the right hand of the Father now bear witness to God's mercy and love not only through missionary work and prayers, but also through their commitment to their neighbor that has been manifested since the first summary of the Church in Jerusalem.¹¹ Their works are the works of the merciful kingdom.

See, for example, the healing of the lame man at the beautiful gate (Acts 3:1-10), or the resurrection of Tabitha of Joppa (Acts 9:36-42), or the healing of the servant girl tormented by a spirit of divination (Acts 16:16-18). Whoever sees in these scenes the fruits of the propagation of the seeds of the Kingdom of Mercy is not surprised that Saint Luke, inspired by several texts of the Old Testament, says that there were no needy among them in the emerging church of Jerusalem. Believers lived according to the Word and understood that the Lord and Master of all creation is God alone. This biblical approach is what confesses the establishment of the "year of remission" prescribed in Deuteronomy 15:1-11 (ἔτος τῆς ἀφέσεως, v. 9) and proclaimed by Jesus in Luke 4:19 as the "year of the Lord's favor" based on a reading of Isaiah 61:1-2 (ἐνιαυτὸν κυρίου δεκτὸν). After the resurrection of Christ, the year of the Lord's favor opens in the midst of the community of believers until the end of the ages, until He comes again and restores all things just as He said by the mouth of the prophets.¹²

5. CONCLUSIONS

According to the Lucan Diptych, the church today finds itself in an eschatological stage of God's saving work: between the incarnate Christ who sowed the seeds of the Kingdom and entrusted his apostles and disciples to bear witness to his works and teachings, and the Christ who will come at the end of time to open for us the dwelling places of the Heavenly Father. This period, often referred to as the "already but not yet" phase of salvation history, is marked by the tension between the inaugurated Kingdom of God and its future consummation. In this crucial time, the works of mercy are not a choice, but rather a duty to all believers. The imperative to engage in acts of compassion and justice is rooted in the very nature of the Christian vocation, as exemplified by Jesus Christ and his early followers.

This is a great challenge for each and every Christian, who upon reading Luke's Gospel understands that caring for one's neighbor in the light of the imitation of God is not only about satisfying

¹¹ See Ac 2:42-47; 4:32-35; 5:12-16.

¹² See Ac 3:21; cf. Acts 9:11; Jer 24:6; Eze 17:23.

his or her primary and urgent needs, but that the Christian must make this service an opportunity for the person assisted to experience God's love and have a foretaste of the fruits of the Kingdom. The Lucan narrative emphasizes that true discipleship involves a holistic approach to ministry, one that addresses both physical and spiritual needs. This dual focus ensures that acts of mercy are not merely transactional but transformative, fostering a deeper encounter with the divine.

Being at the service of the weakest allows believers to have a foretaste of the Kingdom, not because they feel they are benefactors and benevolent like God, but because in this way they see and perceive how the Lord has worked and continues to work for the salvation of all. This perspective shifts the focus from the giver to the receiver, highlighting the reciprocal nature of Christian service. When believers engage in acts of mercy, they participate in the ongoing redemptive work of Christ, witnessing firsthand the unfolding of God's salvific plan. This experience is a profound reminder of the interconnectedness of all humanity and the shared responsibility to care for one another.

When the believers' commitment to their neighbor is truly inspired by the teaching of Jesus Christ, all they can say is "we have done *only* that which we ought to have done" (Lk 17:10) and be ever attentive to all who need help as they await the glorious second coming. This humble acknowledgment underscores the notion that acts of mercy are not extraordinary feats but fundamental aspects of Christian life. The anticipation of Christ's return serves as a powerful motivator for believers to remain vigilant and proactive in their service to others, embodying the values of the Kingdom in their daily lives. In doing so, they not only prepare themselves for the eschatological fulfillment of God's promises but also contribute to the realization of the Kingdom here and now.

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