

Loving Our Enemies: The Core of Jesus' Vision in the Sayings Gospel Q

by Robert Perry

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The Sayings Gospel Q is a hypothetical gospel. It “exists” only in the remains it left scattered across the gospels of Matthew and Luke. Its importance, however, cannot be overestimated. Many scholars consider it to be our earliest written record of the Jesus tradition. It has been called “certainly the most important source for reconstructing the teaching of Jesus” (Theissen & Merz, 1998, p. 29) and “our primary source of information about what he was trying to say, and do” (Robinson, 2007, p. vii). Yet it presents a very different vision of primitive Christianity than the traditional one handed down from the book of Acts. Specifically, it presents a Jesus who is not yet the Christ of Christianity. Contrary to traditional images, in Q his deeds take a backseat to his words. He is unconcerned with the early church’s kerygma of the crucified and risen One. Indeed, he seems unconcerned with himself altogether. Rather, he holds out to us a profound and unsettling vision of how to live.

“Q” is short for the German *Quelle*, meaning “source.” Q was “discovered” in 1838 as a natural outcome of the notion of Markan priority—the idea that Mark was the first gospel to be written, and that Matthew and Luke essentially got their storyline from Mark. Once all of Mark was extracted from Matthew and Luke, it was readily observed that Matthew and Luke still share a great deal of material in common. Furthermore, this material has characteristics that strongly suggested it derived from a common written source (as opposed to a common body of oral tradition). John S. Kloppenborg (2000, pp. 56-60) boils these characteristics down to three:

1. *Verbal agreement.* Matthew and Luke’s verbal agreement in Q materials is at times near-verbatim. Overall, Matthew and Luke agree with each other *better* when copying from Q (assuming Q existed) than when copying from Mark (Kloppenborg Verbin, 2000, pp. 57-58).
2. *Agreement in order.* Though Matthew and Luke insert Q passages in different places in Mark’s storyline, they still display striking agreement in the relative ordering of Q material. “Approximately one third of the pericopae, accounting for almost one-half of the word count, are in the same relative order” (Kloppenborg Verbin, 2000, p. 29).
3. *Unusual phrases and words.* In the Q material, Matthew and Luke share various peculiar words and grammatical constructions, ones that are either rare in or absent from the Jewish and Christian literature of the time.

New Testament scholars have found the evidence for Q to be so persuasive that leading scholar Marcus Borg estimates that “over 90 percent of mainline scholars accept...the existence of Q” (2006, p. 314). As a result, the two-document hypothesis (that Mark and Q were the source documents for Matthew and Luke) forms part of the bedrock of modern New Testament

scholarship.

Q consists almost entirely of sayings of Jesus. There is no birth story, and, more significantly, no passion or resurrection stories. There is only one miracle story (the healing of a centurion's son), yet it mainly provides the setting for a concluding saying from Jesus. There are references to Jesus' miracles and indirect references to his crucifixion, so it's not that these events are denied. It's simply that they are in the background. What is in the foreground is his teaching.

This focus on teaching and the corresponding absence of a passion narrative led many scholars to assume that Q was a kind of "half-gospel," used as a supplement to the kerygma of the cross and resurrection. After all, how could a true gospel lack the story of the crucifixion? That attitude changed, however, with the discovery of the gospel of Thomas in 1945. Here was a gospel, yet one that was very much like Q: a collection of sayings, with no story of Jesus' birth, death, or resurrection. Further, almost one-third of the sayings in Thomas (37 out of 114) had parallels in Q! (Kloppenborg, 2008, p. 109).

Now it is generally recognized that Q was the gospel of a particular community. It was that community's construal of the meaning and significance of Jesus. What makes this particular construal so important is its proximity to Jesus, in both time and space. Q's earliest version is generally believed to have been put in writing in the 50's or 60's, decades before the New Testament gospels. Further, based on internal geographical references, many scholars believe that it was written in the Lower Galilee, where Jesus' ministry actually took place. Q, then, represents a kind of time capsule, buried not in the ground but in the canonical gospels, an ancient record of the Jesus movement before Christianity. It takes us back to a time when the voice of Jesus was still ringing in the ears of his followers.

No one today, however, would regard Q as a pure record of the words of Jesus. It has clearly been shaped by the hand of a redactor. It contains both early material and later accretions. How, then, are we to separate out the early from the late? The proposal that currently dominates the discussion is that of Kloppenborg. In 1987, in *The Formation of Q*, he followed up on earlier suggestions by other scholars and separated Q into three layers, the first two layers—Q¹ and Q²—being the most important.¹ Based on a literary analysis, he claimed that the original form of Q consisted of six "sapiential" (or wisdom) speeches, which exhort their hearers to "a countercultural lifestyle that includes love of enemies, nonretaliation, debt forgiveness, and a willingness to expose oneself to danger, all undergirded by appeals to the superabundant care of a provident God" (Kloppenborg Verbin, 2000, p. 392). James Robinson has since shown that a number of other scholars have regarded these same speeches as coming from "the archaic pre-Q layer" (Robinson, 2007, pp. 1, 190-196), thus corroborating their archaic nature.

Kloppenborg's second layer is a dramatic departure from the sapiential Q¹. He labels this layer "apocalyptic" and says it is characterized by "the announcement of judgment." It assumes a Deuteronomistic view of history in which God repeatedly sends his envoys to an unrepentant Israel, which rejects and kills them, thus provoking God's punishment. Q² sees this pattern being repeated in the current generation, which has rejected God's latest messengers—John and Jesus—and has thus warranted God's impending judgment.

Why does Kloppenborg conclude that this layer is a later insertion? Primarily because of *interpolations*, places where apocalyptic Q² material has been inserted into the middle of an organized Q¹ discourse, thus breaking the flow of its logic. This Q² material is attached to a Q¹ saying on the basis of a theme or catchword. This gives the unavoidable impression that the Q¹ material was there first, just as the hat rack must have been there before the hat was hung on it.

For the words of Q, I will use the translation of the International Q Project (IQP), a group of over forty scholars headed by James M. Robinson, John S. Kloppenborg, and Paul Hoffman, who met twice yearly, beginning in 1985, and drew upon a massive database of Q scholarship stretching back to 1838 in order to construct an approximation of the original wording and order of Q. In 2000 they released *The Critical Edition of Q*, with the intention that it would “function as a standard research tool for the study of Q in the future” (p. xv).

The Inaugural Sermon and the love of enemies

In this chapter, I will rely on Q¹ to provide the message of Jesus. Specifically, I will draw from the first and longest of Kloppenborg’s six speeches. This is often called the “Inaugural Sermon” or simply “the Sermon.” Robinson describes its central importance:

The most prominent such cluster is what is called the Sermon, though that is really a misnomer, since it is not assumed to be a speech Jesus made on a given occasion. Rather, it is an early collection of Jesus’ sayings into what was no doubt considered to be the core of his message. This “sermon” was put at the beginning of Jesus’ message in the Sayings Gospel Q. As Matthew and Luke borrowed from Mark, they each fitted the Sermon into Mark at a slightly different geographical location. The result is that in Matthew it is called the Sermon on the Mount and in Luke the Sermon on the Plain. (2005, pp. 20-21).

If the Inaugural Sermon was the core of Jesus’ message, then the discourse on the love of enemies might be called the core of the core. As Walter Bauer said in 1917,

In the archaic form of the Sermon on the Mount the requirement of love of enemies had assumed the dominant position and, after the prelude of the Beatitudes, had come to stand at the head of the whole series of exhortations. In Matthew, who subjected that archaic form to an all-encompassing revision, that has vanished. (quoted in Robinson, 2005, p. 15)

In looking at the translation of the IQP, it is indeed quite striking how prominent the love of enemies discourse is in it. As Bauer said, it follows directly after the Beatitudes (which are now only four: poor, hungry, mourning, and persecuted). It then occupies thirty percent of the Sermon’s word count, making it the longest integrated discourse in the Sermon. In addition to occupying pride of place in Q, a great deal of it almost certainly goes back to Jesus. It contains the two sayings most highly rated by the Jesus Seminar (6:29a and 6:29b) and five out of their top eight (Funk, Hoover, & the Jesus Seminar, 1993, p. 549).

What follows is that discourse. I have included 6:36 (“Being Full of Pity like Your Father”) as it seems to function in Q as a conclusion to the discourse, just as it does in Matthew’s version. Also, the versification is Lukan, as scholars believe that Luke remained more faithful to Q’s ordering. Finally, for the sake of readability (and following the practice in Robinson, 2007, p. 241), I have left out the marks from *The Critical Edition of Q* that indicate the various kinds and degrees of certainty and uncertainty. The only marks remaining are two dots (before 6:32 and in 6:36), which indicate uncertainty that any text occupied these places, and parentheses (in 6:34), where the text had to be emended.

Love Your Enemies

²⁷ Love your enemies ²⁸ and pray for those persecuting you, ^{35c-d} so that you may become sons of your Father, for he raises his sun on bad and good and rains on the just and unjust. (Q 6:27-28, 35c-d = Matt 5:44-45)

Renouncing One's Own Rights

²⁹ The one who slaps you on the cheek, offer him the other as well; and to the person wanting to take you to court and get your shirt, turn over to him the coat as well. ^{Matt 5:41} And the one who conscripts you for one mile, go with him a second. ³⁰ To the one who asks of you, give; and from the one who borrows, do not ask back what is yours. (Q 6:29-30 = Matt 5:39-42)

The Golden Rule

³¹ And the way you want people to treat you, that is how you treat them. (Q 6:31 = Matt 7:12)

Impartial Love

³² .. If you love those loving you, what reward do you have? Do not even tax collectors do the same? ³⁴ And if you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what (reward do) you (have)? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? (Q 6:32, 34 = Matt 5:46, 47)

Being Full of Pity like Your Father

³⁶ Be full of pity, just as your Father .. is full of pity. (Q 6:36 = Matt 5:48)

I find this to be a truly remarkable discourse, one that rocks our contemporary psyche as much as it must have astounded its original audience. In interpreting it, my goal will be to draw out its plain meaning. This is not veiled symbolism and metaphor, but rather a series of straightforward injunctions. My intent will be to burrow into their plain meaning and pull out their underlying assumptions. In doing so, I will use each statement to throw light on every other one. While it is true that at least several of these sayings were probably originally independent (Kloppenborg, 1987, p. 174), they still express enough of a shared sentiment to illuminate each other.

Love Your Enemies

The first section opens with that stark injunction, "Love your enemies." We all know this saying, of course. Yet have we ever thought about the emotional state that it describes, about how it would feel to actually *love* our *enemies*? It is understandable if we haven't. The saying seems incongruous, for the simple reason that love and enmity are such opposites. They are not only opposite as emotions, they stand for people at opposite ends of our personal spectrum. We love those near and dear to us, with whom our bond is deep, positive, and enduring, who want our happiness and nourish us in fundamental ways. We have enmity toward those who are against us, who seek to profit at our expense, who despise and think the worst of us, and who want to destroy us. The first group we seek to draw close. The second group we want to keep away, on the other side of a wall, if not on the other side of the planet. Can we imagine feeling the same deep love for an enemy as we feel for, say, a romantic partner?

I encourage you to try this out. Pick someone you love as fully and unconditionally as possible, and then imagine feeling that exact same love for someone you consider an enemy

(remembering that anyone you have any enmity towards is an enemy). I find this to be an interesting and telling exercise. If you were able to feel even some of that love, and if you could hold that feeling, that person would no longer *be* your enemy (even if you were still his or hers).

Along with love comes a genuine concern, which I believe we see in the very next saying: “and pray for those persecuting you.” Love desires nothing but the wellbeing of the beloved. If that beloved falls into a pit, love simply wants to see her lifted out. If that pit is some error on her part, love still just wants to see her lifted out, not to pay her debt to truth, but simply to regain her happiness. And if that error entails her persecuting the person who loves her, love continues to want the exact same thing.

That is how I think we must read the injunction to “pray for those persecuting you.” We might be tempted to read it in the more typical condescending manner of praying for those idiots to see the light and mend their ways (and above all *stop persecuting us*). Yet given its placement, praying for your persecutors is clearly the same thing as loving your enemies. Consequently, we have to interpret the praying for as an expression of love, as the outpouring of pure goodwill coupled with genuine concern, which knows nothing but that our beloved is in a pit and that she must be lifted out. How her pit may personally impact us is immaterial. We just want her to be happy.

Now we come to the reason to love your enemies and pray for your persecutors: “so that you may become sons of your Father, for he raises his sun on bad and good and rains on the just and unjust.” However brief it is, here in a nutshell is a profound and unconventional vision of God. Immersed as we are in the typical view, in which God responds very differently to the “bad and good,” it is easy to just gloss over this line. If it registers at all, maybe we think, “Well, perhaps there is *some* sense in which God treats everyone the same.” The traditional idea that God treats bad and good *differently* thus becomes the larger frame into which we work the detail that “in some sense God treats everyone the same.” Yet what if this vision of an impartial God is not a footnote in Jesus’ larger vision of God? What if it *is* his larger vision?

I believe that sheer intellectual honesty requires us to face the conflict between these two views. They are quite simply competing visions of God. In the traditional view, it is basic to the character of God that he treats bad and good differently. After all, he consigns the bad to an eternity of burning in hell and lifts the good into an eternity of bliss in heaven. You can’t get treatment that is any more different than that!

It is quite natural for us to see God this way, since, in our experience, this is how every living thing behaves. Animals respond one way to their young and another way to their deadly enemies. People, of course, are exactly the same. We treat our family very differently than the criminal who threatens our family. Our entire experience of sentient creatures is that they respond differently to different creatures. Given that everything behaves this way, why wouldn’t God?

There is, in fact, tremendous pressure for us to see God *in particular* as punishing the bad and rewarding the good. In human society, of course, the bad often end up at the top of the heap, while the good wait in vain for their reward. Observing this year after year, decade after decade, the pressure builds in us to believe that, in the end, the scales will be righted. Our eyes then turn to God as the court of final appeal, the place where all will finally get their due, where justice will be done at last.

In this capacity, we allow God a lack of clemency that we would consider unchristian in ourselves. As the very apex of the justice system, he is mandated to do things that, were *we* to do them, would be lawless vigilantism. Paul made this explicit: “Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the

Lord” (Romans 12:19; NRSV). What is especially significant about this passage is that it is surrounded by apparent allusions to the teachings recorded in Q: “Bless those who persecute you,” (12:14); “Do not repay anyone evil for evil” (12:17); “If your enemies are hungry, feed them” (12:20). Yet for Paul, the theological basis for this ethic is the opposite of that in Q. Paul: “Treat your enemies kindly; vengeance is God’s job.” Q: “Love your enemies, for that is what God does.”

We must be willing to consider that Jesus’ vision of God was the latter. There are just too many snapshots in the Jesus tradition of a God who loves all, including the bad, the lost,² the last,³ the poor,⁴ and the nobodies.⁵ This, of course, is the point of the famous parable of the prodigal son. The snapshot we see here in the Inaugural Sermon is explicit, and also quite beautiful. God’s love is likened to the life-giving sun casting its light over the entire landscape, warming the faces of good and bad alike. Or to the life-giving rain sweeping across the landscape, blessing everyone with needed water and the promise of a bountiful harvest. Both sunshine and rain are utterly heedless of the moral status of the persons on which they bestow their blessings. They don’t pause to assess that status before falling on someone. They just fall, giving warmth, giving life, indiscriminately. No one is favored and no one is excluded. That, according to this saying, is how God loves.

Notice, too, that both images are of renewal and rebirth. Rain renews the land. The sunrise (“he raises his sun”) is the rebirth of light after the darkness. In this metaphor, then, God’s love renews us, causes us to be reborn. I find the image of sunshine to be particularly meaningful. The sun is a transcendent power that is lifted high above the earth, where it sheds light and life, saving us from darkness and from death. It is constant, unwavering. All it does is shine. Hence, to be selective in its shining, to refuse to shine on someone, would go against its nature. Further, to shine on someone is a metaphor for smiling on someone, for being happy with that person. Thus, if God’s love is like sunshine, then it means that God is incapable of doing anything but loving, anything but beaming his universal approval, incapable of leaving even the worst sinner out in the cold. By nature, all he can do is bathe everyone in the warmth of his unwavering smile.

As I said above, this is a God who is unlike our experience of other living things. This God is definitely not the typical projection of human fallibility and favoritism onto a cosmic screen. Where did Jesus get such a radical vision? Robinson weighs in:

It is striking that Jesus, at this most central point, did not derive his unusual vision of God, and his highest ethic [love of enemies], from the Hebrew scriptures, or indeed from anywhere in the culture of the Ancient Near East. For in that case it could hardly have centered on God’s impartiality to foe as well as friend....

...It is surprising indeed that Jesus’ rare view of God, and its resultant radical ethic, is derived from his experience of nature around him. Presumably, in Nazareth, the climate on the wrong side of the tracks was the same as the climate on the right side of the tracks. What was unusual was for someone, Jesus, to draw such a radical ethic from this simple observation of nature. (2007, p.134-135)

Borg, in contrast, seems to see Jesus’ vision of God as rooted in direct spiritual experience. Speaking of Jesus’ unconventional designation of God as *abba* (“papa”), Borg says, “The most plausible explanation of Jesus’ departure from conventional usage is the intensity of his spiritual experience....At the heart of Jesus’ prayer life was the experience of communion with God” (1987, p. 45).

One way to express what is so different about this God is to note that he⁶ lacks what everyone else has: a life composed of a series of concentric circles.⁷ At the center of each life is the self. Then immediately surrounding that self is its inner circle, composed of those people and things viewed as compatible with that self, congenial to its interests. Radiating out from there are a series of further circles in which this compatibility is perceived to drain away with each successive ring. The outer circles are increasingly composed of that which is viewed as antagonistic to the self, alien to it, inimical to its interests. The outer circles, in short, are occupied by the Other—the alien and, most importantly, the enemy. Since love is a response to what is seen as agreeable to the self, our love naturally weakens with each successive circle, eventually turning into its opposite: suspicious indifference toward the stranger and outright hatred toward the enemy.

In one way or another, this is every life. Every self draws into its heart and into its life that which it views as congenial to its interests, and pushes away and protects itself from that which it views as antagonistic. This architecture of a human life (and an animal life) is so assumed, so unvarying, that we don't bother to talk about it. It seems to be the universal template.

That is what makes this God so remarkable. He completely falls outside the universal template. He has no concentric circles. He feels toward those who ought to be in the outer circle as if they are in the inner, and treats them accordingly. For him, they *are* in the inner circle. This seems to be the main point of the saying about the sun and rain. We cannot help but notice the contrast with the traditional view, where the “good” and the “just” are in God's inner circle, and the “bad” and the “unjust” are “cast forth into the outer darkness” (Matt 8:12; ASV). To say that God treats the bad and unjust as if they were members of the inner circle says, in the clearest terms possible, that this is not the traditional God, that with this God *there are no circles*. Everyone is in the inner circle.

This, of course, is why we are enjoined to love our enemies. We are being called to collapse the typical architecture of a human life, to opt out of that universal template, to tear down those concentric walls. We are called to include everyone in our inner circle, even those who seem bent on destroying us. Why? Because that is how God is. In loving our enemies, we become like him. We become a chip off the old block. In the words of Jesus, “You...become sons of your Father.”

How different this is to the traditional concept of “son of God”! Eventually, of course, a single individual was seen to be the Son of God, someone endowed before the dawn of time with a uniquely divine nature, and therefore someone that we mere mortals could only look up to and worship. But here in Q, the tables are turned: Instead of us looking to him as Son of God, *he* is calling *us* to become sons of God. And we do so, he says, by collapsing our system of circles, by loving literally everyone with an inner circle love.

Renouncing One's Own Rights

Immediately after the saying about loving your enemies comes a series of familiar yet deeply challenging sayings. I'll lay them out on separate lines:

²⁹ The one who slaps you on the cheek, offer him the other as well;
and to the person wanting to take you to court and get your shirt, turn over to him the coat
as well.

Matt 5:41 And the one who conscripts you for one mile, go with him a second.

³⁰ To the one who asks of you, give;

and from the one who borrows, do not ask back what is yours. (Q 6:29-30 = Matt 5:39-42)

The first three (other cheek, coat and shirt, second mile) are particularly unsettling. Jesus seems to be instructing us not only to let ourselves be attacked, but to actually outdo our attacker by giving ourselves an extra dose.

People have struggled with these words ever since they were first uttered. On the face of it, they seem like a command to not lift a finger in our defense no matter what is done to us, so that even though we may lose everything in this world, we earn our reward in the next. In contrast to this traditional interpretation of nonresistance, an influential contemporary interpretation has it that these sayings actually encourage a *nonviolent resistance*, in which the powerless cleverly humiliate their oppressors while simultaneously exposing the injustice being done (Wink, 2007).

I believe that to understand these sayings, we need to see them in light of the preceding injunction to love your enemies. We need to see them, in other words, as behavioral expressions of the transformed state of mind Jesus has just described. This is not just because of their proximity to the love of enemies injunction; it's also because of their similarity in content. These sayings seem to depict us treating aggressors as if they were our best friends. They seem to show us, in other words, treating people who should be in our outer circle as if they were in our inner circle, just as in "Love Your Enemies."

All three sayings appear to be variations on a single pattern. In each case, you are in some sense being attacked, exploited. The attack is probably by a social superior. Because Matthew's versions says the "right cheek," the slap to the cheek is often viewed by scholars as a humiliating backhanded slap given by a superior to a subordinate (the only way to slap someone's right cheek with your right hand is to use the back of your hand). The person taking you to court to "get your shirt" is most likely a creditor who is suing you because you haven't paid your debt. Being poor, the only collateral you had to put up was your shirt. The "one who conscripts you for one mile" is a Roman soldier who has the right to compel you, a Jewish peasant, to carry his heavy pack for him.

In each case, this person is forcibly trying to take something physical away from you: your physical wellbeing (by slapping you), your clothing, or your time and energy (through forced labor). In the process, he is also taking away your dignity. All three situations are clearly humiliating. Your status, which was already lower than that of your attacker, has just been lowered even further.

Being unjust, this situation does grant you certain compensatory rights. At the very least, you have the right to smolder with resentment while enduring your ordeal—a right you are expected to exercise. At the most, you have the right to defend yourself and even to retaliate—to turn the tables, take back control, and recoup your dignity. You aren't expected to exercise these latter rights, as the consequences would be terrible. But they still exist, even if only on paper, and as these unexercised rights build up, the mounting pressure threatens to explode into open revolt.

For some reason, however, you renounce these rights entirely and instead do something very shocking. You freely give your attacker twice as much as he was trying to take. You "offer him the other" cheek to slap. You "turn over to him the coat as well." Since you wore only two garments, an inner and an outer one, giving him both would leave you naked. And you "go with him a second" mile. The fact that you freely offered the second cheek, the second garment, and the second mile implies that you also freely offered the *first*. It implies that you saw the first not

as something forcibly taken from you while you burned with hatred, but as a gift you gave of your own free accord. Thus, *both* cheeks, *both* garments, and *both* miles are apparently viewed by you as free gifts.

There are two things that strike us as particularly shocking about these sayings. First, you display an extravagant attentiveness to the needs of an enemy, even though this enemy is in a far more comfortable position than you and is attacking you this very instant! Second, you display a blithe inattentiveness to your own needs, and this at a time when your needs are especially acute, and when you are especially justified in attending to them. This combination is not only extremely unconventional; it seems almost suicidal. One wonders how long you could actually survive in this mode.

How do we interpret these two stances? We need to look for echoes of them in other teachings of Jesus. We don't have to look far, of course, to find echoes of extravagant attentiveness to the needs of an enemy. Jesus has, after all, just enjoined us to love our enemies. It is also not hard to find in his teachings the theme of blithe inattentiveness to one's own needs. Indeed, we find it all over the place. His characters are constantly in a state of carefree joy and celebration, even in the midst of dire circumstances, because they trust in God's care. They don't need to secure their own comfort and survival. They leave that to God. Thus, even though they are desperately poor, they feel fortunate, even blessed, because God's kingdom is theirs (Q 6:20). They see no need to worry about procuring food and clothing for themselves. Won't God feed and clothe them as he does the birds and flowers (Q 12:22b-31)?

This theme of inattentiveness to our own needs is thus framed very differently than we might expect. When asked by a holy man to ignore our needs, we probably perceive this as a voluntary sacrifice for the sake of being righteous, a painful burden that we bear for God. Yet Jesus pictures us not as feeling burdened, but instead as carefree. Rather than donning sackcloth and ashes, we feel like throwing a party (as Jesus' characters so often do⁸). Rather than feeling that we have sacrificed everything, we feel that we *have* everything.

This gives us a new lens through which to see this trio of sayings. I believe that what Jesus has done here is turn upside down the psychology of attack. We view a situation of attack through two assumptions that are so basic we scarcely bring them to consciousness, let alone raise them to question. The first assumption is that the attacker is the one in power. He is in the strong, dominant position, while his victim is in the weak, vulnerable position. The attacker is doing; the victim is being done to. The second assumption is that the victim is losing while the attacker is gaining. Something of value is being taken from victim and is going to the attacker. That something may be tangible, like a shirt, or intangible, like the simple sense of status that comes from having the upper hand.

In short, we assume the attacker is in the position of *strength* and the victim is in the position of *need*. These universal assumptions, however, are turned on their heads in the two assumptions I listed above. Displaying extravagant attentiveness to the needs of an attacker implies that the *attacker* is the one in need. Displaying blithe inattentiveness to your own needs—because God has got them covered—implies that *you*, the person under attack, are the one in the position of strength.

In Jesus' vision, then, when attacked, you can see *yourself* in the position of strength and your *attacker* in the position of need. To try to get inside this unconventional mindset, think of someone who has recently attacked you and then silently and compassionately say to this person, "*I am in the position of strength. You are in the position of need.*" This is such a direct reversal of the psychology of attack that we can find it hard to wrap our minds around it, yet I

think that to a degree we can. Something in us dimly recognizes this other mindset. And it certainly fits this trio of Jesus' sayings.

Let's revisit these three sayings, then, from within this new mindset. You are a poor peasant, yet you have embraced Jesus' teachings and have to come to feel a profound sense of God's nearness and providence. Although you live on the edge, you carry a rocklike feeling of security. You know that God will take care of you, and you see the evidence of this. You regularly see your needs met in remarkable and unexpected ways. And so, in spite of dire appearances, you live a happy, carefree life, secure in God's care.

Thus, when a superior gives you a backhanded slap, or takes you to court for your shirt, or forces you to carry his burden for a mile, it doesn't actually occur to you to feel threatened, or even to feel like his inferior. You are in the hands of God, not the hands of this man. This leaves you free to regard your attacker as a person in his own right. Indeed, you go further. You genuinely love him, the same way his mother loves him, the same way you love your child. You love him, in other words, as God loves him.

And out of this love, you see that he is in need. He clearly feels desperately lacking, or why else would he compromise his very humanity to claw from you some insignificant scrap? What could this situation be, then, but an opportunity to give? And with God behind you, you can afford to give, especially when the other's need is so great. So you give. You make the thing he was trying to seize by force into your free gift to him. Then, overflowing with compassion, you generously give him twice as much, not because you have a martyr complex, but simply because you love this person, and he is in a position of need while you are in a position of strength.

As uncommon as this kind of giving is, it is not unheard of. Indeed, it is a familiar pattern, one that we associate with saints and holy men and women, with those who have succeeded, at least to a significant degree, in collapsing those concentric circles and loving their enemies. Two well-known stories illustrate the mindset I am talking about. In both, the "victim" sees himself in the position of strength and his attacker in the position of need, and thus responds with defenseless generosity. The first is an old Zen story, which is widely available in different forms:

Many years ago there was a Zen Master whose life was very simple. He lived by himself in a small hut at the foot of a mountain. One evening, while he was away, a thief snuck into the hut only to find that there was nothing to steal.

After a little while, the Zen Master returned and found the thief. "You have come a long way to visit me," he told the burglar, "and you should not return empty handed. Please take my clothes as a gift." The Zen Master stripped off his humble garments. The thief was bewildered, but he took the clothes and ran away.

As the thief fled into the distance the Zen Master sat naked, watching the moon. "Poor fellow," he thought, "I wish I could give him this beautiful moon."

The second story is from Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*. Jean Valjean has just been released from nineteen years in prison for stealing a loaf of bread. Because he is a convict, no one will take him in—no one, that is, except the Bishop of Digne, a deeply spiritual man who has no lock on his door. Utterly devoted to the poor, the only objects of value he allows himself are six settings of silver cutlery and two silver candlesticks. The Bishop gives Jean Valjean a warm welcome, a hearty supper, and his first bed in nineteen years. He treats him as an honored guest, at one point saying he knew Valjean's name before being told. Valjean asks in surprise if he really knew his name. "Yes," answered the bishop, "your name is my brother" (p. 76). Valjean's

time in prison, however, has left him hardened and bitter, and in the dead of night he steals the Bishop's silver cutlery and flees. The next day, three gendarmes bring him back to the home of the Bishop, having found the silver on him and suspecting him of stealing it. Jean Valjean is on the verge of being returned to prison. The Bishop, however, says that the cutlery had actually been a gift, but not only the cutlery.

“Ah, there you are!” he said, looking at Jean Valjean. “I’m glad to see you. But I gave you the candlesticks, too, which are silver like the rest and would bring two hundred francs. Why didn’t you take them along with your cutlery?”

Jean Valjean opened his eyes and looked at the bishop with an expression that no human tongue could describe. (p. 105)

If you know the story, you know that this is the pivotal event in Jean Valjean's life. It transforms him from a hardened convict into a heroic and truly Christ-like figure.

What is of interest to us here, of course, is just how closely this fits the pattern laid down in Jesus' three sayings. We have an attacker taking something from someone who not only does not defend himself, but frames the theft as a *gift*, a gift which he then *doubles*. I don't know if Hugo consciously modeled this scene after these sayings from the Sermon on the Mount, but the correspondence is quite striking. He has not only reproduced the basic pattern behind all three sayings, but I believe he has captured their true meaning as well. These behaviors should be understood as expressions of an almost divine love, a love which sees an apparent enemy as a dear brother, and which thus responds to his onslaught not with self-defense, but with extravagant generosity. Hugo has also captured the transformative effect of this on the attacker, for in the end, the attacker's need is not so much for the silver or the shirt, but for this very sort of transcendent love.

The final sayings under “Renouncing One's Own Rights” continue this theme of selfless generosity: “To the one who asks of you, give; and from the one who borrows, do not ask back what is yours” (Q 6:30). Even though these two sayings are not about enemies, they contain the same essential spirit as the sayings we have been considering. They depict an unnervingly open-handed generosity which takes no thought of the logical consequences for oneself. Those consequences are not hard to figure out. In discussing the gospel of Thomas version of this saying (Thom 95), the Jesus Seminar observes, “The admonition to lend without any expectation of return is a global injunction that would lead to instant financial disaster” (Funk et al., 1993, p. 523). Here again, then, we have extravagant attentiveness to the needs of the other and blithe inattentiveness to the needs of oneself—presumably in the assumption that God has one's needs taken care of. These final sayings are therefore further evidence that in this discourse we are dealing not so much with nonresistance or with nonviolent resistance,⁹ but with *generosity*, a generosity that is so heedless and unrestrained that it is either humanly impossible, dangerously suicidal, or the expression of a transfigured state of mind.

The Golden Rule

Next in the discourse comes the famous “golden rule”: “And the way you want people to treat you, that is how you treat them” (Q 6:31). There is good reason to believe that Jesus did not utter this exact saying. That at least was the assessment of the Jesus Seminar, who noted that not only was this saying common lore, but that it “expresses nothing that cuts against the common grain, or surprises and shocks, or indulges in exaggeration or paradox” (Funk et al., p. 156).

It thus lacks the essential voiceprint of Jesus. And it's true, there is something rather prosaic about the golden rule. I regularly find myself saying to my three-year-old girl, "Now you don't want your brother to take *your* toys away, do you?" The implied message is clear: "And if you don't want him to do that to you, you shouldn't do it to him." I say this to her not because Jesus' groundbreaking insight opened up a new world of thought for me. It is because the golden rule is a commonsense, almost knee-jerk, response to the obvious hypocrisy of our double standards.

Yet I still think the golden rule points in the direction of Jesus, even if perhaps it doesn't go all the way in that direction. On the surface it is a noble though pedestrian guide for selecting the right behaviors ("If I don't want him to take away my toys, then I shouldn't take away his."). Yet beneath its surface there is a deeper component, one that fits well in this discourse.

The golden rule implies a stepping out of our usual mental stance. Normally, we view our behavior from the giving end, from the standpoint of how it will affect us, the doer. However, the golden rule asks that we imagine ourselves on the *receiving* end. We have to put ourselves in the place of the other person and ask, "If I were that other person, how would I feel about being on the receiving end of this action?" We have to be concerned with how our action will affect not ourselves, but the other.

This simple change of perspective contains the seeds of an internal revolution, one that propels us out of our self-centeredness. Now, rather than seeing ourselves as the sole subject moving through a world of objects, we see this other person as the relevant subject here. Instead of seeing the situation from our vantage point, now we look out through her eyes. No longer is she just a satellite orbiting our sun. Now she becomes her own sun, a person in her own right. Her worth is no longer contingent on her ability to benefit us. Now she carries her own intrinsic worth, independent of how she affects us. The question is no longer, "How well does she meet my needs?" but rather, "What are her needs?"

This other-oriented mindset puts us in the same ballpark as the other sayings we have been examining. Carried to its furthest extension, it would mean that we would respond to someone based solely on *his* need, even if he were suing us to get the shirt off our back.

Impartial Love

We now return to the central topic of this discourse: responding with an inner circle love to those who "should" be in our outer circle:

³² .. If you love those loving you, what reward do you have? Do not even tax collectors do the same? ³⁴ And if you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what (reward do) you (have)? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? (Q 6:32, 34)

Jesus is not only alluding to our concentric circles again, he is also subtly revealing the principle that generates them, that of reciprocity based on self-interest. Notice that he does not say, "If you love those close to you" or "if you lend to your friends." He says, "If you love those loving you," and "If you lend to those from who you hope to receive." The clear implication is that we love them *because* they love us; we give them money *because* they'll pay us back (with interest!). We're only willing to give to them—our love, our money—because they give to us. We only scratch their back because they scratch ours. This, of course, is why we have those concentric circles—some people scratch our backs better than others. The ones that do it really well make it into the inner circle. The ones that instead of scratching our backs stab them, get booted into the outer darkness. This is obvious when you think about it, yet also sobering, for if

everything is quid pro quo, is any love or giving really happening? When all our “love” is just a business transaction, do we even know what love is?

Even if we don’t consciously notice this point in these latest sayings, it surely registers on an emotional level. It is, in fact, part of their overall purpose, which is to motivate us. Jesus has already given us a huge motivation to love our enemies. He told us that by doing so we become sons of our Father (6:35c). One could hardly imagine a more wonderful promise. It holds out to us not only the exalted sense of worth and dignity that would come from being a son of God; it also implies that, as son, we are heir to everything our Father has. If you want a sense of the motivating power of this promise, take the following line (a combination of Mark 1:11 and Luke 15:31¹⁰) and imagine God saying it very personally to you: “You are my son, and all I have is yours” (feel free to change “son” to “daughter”). I don’t know about you, but the impact of that line never fails to take me by surprise.

To successfully motivate people to change, however, you need to not only offer them positive motivation—a vision of what they will obtain. You also need to use negative motivation—in this case an explanation of the price of staying where they are. You need to counter their resistance to change, and the objections it throws up. That is exactly what Jesus does here. These lines clearly look like a response to resistance arguing for stasis.

When we encounter Jesus calling us to love everyone, even our enemies, of course we are going to experience resistance. We sense that such a change would be a personal revolution, one that would overturn the whole structure of our lives. We wonder if we are even *able* to change so monumentally. Further, these lines bring to the surface buried guilt, the guilt we all harbor over not loving well enough. These considerations impel us to mount a quick defense: “Well, I *do* love. I love my family. I love a circle of numerous friends. Isn’t that enough? Does it really matter if I make an exception of a few enemies out there?” We make a case, in other words, for our current loving being adequate, so that the guilt subsides and the call to radical change is taken off the table.

Jesus’ response cuts right through our case. Everyone does what you’re talking about, he says. Even the worst of people have an inner circle whom they love. This point is so obviously true that it silences our argument. We are left face to face with the inadequacy of our current love and Jesus’ stark call to change. As a result, these lines can haunt us. In my case, they have surfaced in my mind since I was a teen as I repeatedly observed just how true they are. I observed, for instance, that even members of the Mafia love and defend their family, their inner circle. How, then, was I any different from them?

That, of course, is just the kind of reflection that Jesus is trying to provoke. By referring to Gentiles and tax collectors, he is in essence saying, “Do you really want to be like the ungodly, like those who oppress and exploit you? Do you really want to be like the people who only love those from whom they get something? Do you want to be like those who don’t know what love is?”

And if you *are* like them, he continues, “what reward do you have?” Talk of reward is, of course, an obvious clue that this is motivational speech. But what is this reward? In the context of this discourse, I don’t think it can be part of a merit-based system of rewards and punishments from God, for that would hardly be a God who “raises his sun on bad and good and rains on the just and unjust.” Rather, I think the reward must simply be the blessings that come from loving like God does and thereby being God’s son. These blessings would not be a special reward for meritorious behavior. Rather, they would be the simple result of being like God, in alignment with him, and thereby placing oneself, so to speak, under the waterfall.

In other words, if your love is no better than that of the Gentiles and tax collectors, if your “love” is only for your inner circle of back-scratchers, then you are unlike God, and being so out of accord with him, how can you hope to receive the blessings of Sonship?

Being Full of Pity like Your Father

We come now to the final saying: “Be full of pity, just as your Father .. is full of pity” (Q 6:36). As I said earlier, this seems to function as a conclusion to this discourse in Q, just as it does in Matthew. This is readily apparent in the Scholar’s Version’s translation of Matthew 5:48: “*To sum up*, you are to be unstinting in your generosity in the way your heavenly Father’s generosity is unstinting” (Funk et al., p. 145, my italics). I like this translation, because it makes the point that the entire discourse is summed up in the injunction to be lavishly generous because that’s the way God is.

The IQP, however, decided that in this case Luke has more closely reproduced Q. In Luke, the key word is “oiktirmōn,” usually translated as “merciful,” but also as “full of pity” and “compassionate.” The word thus seems to have two sides to it. First, displaying a charitable kindness toward those who have done wrong (merciful). Second, having a deep awareness of, sympathy with, and desire to relieve, the suffering of another (full of pity, compassionate). The first is a forgiving response to a wrongdoer. The second is a caring response to someone in pain. Both seem relevant here, for the entire discourse has really been about responding to a wrongdoer not as a sinner deserving of punishment (mercy), but as a suffering person in need of gifts (compassion). The discourse has thus been about a combination of mercy and compassion, the same combination we find in the word *oiktirmōn*.

As such, this final saying truly does serve as a fitting summary of this discourse. The entire discourse is calling us to just this kind of profound caring for the suffering of an apparent enemy. In the process, it is calling us out of an almost universal delusion, in which we take it for granted that we are the center of the universe and that others are essentially objects who exist to serve our interests. The “objects” who serve our interests well we call our friends and loved ones, and include in our inner circle. Those who attack our interests we call our enemies, and chase away with chastising anger. This is the unquestioned framework on which our personal lives are built, yet in this egocentric structure is there any real love?

Jesus’ admonition to love our enemies calls us out of this entire framework. It asks that we see others as persons in their own right, possessing their own intrinsic worth, no matter how they treat us. Even when they assault our interests, we can ask not “How do I protect myself?” but “What is their need?” We can respond to them not from a stance of aggressive self-concern, but from a place of merciful compassion, in which our deep caring for them pours forth in a spontaneous prayer that their suffering be relieved. We can see them not as dangerous sinners who must be banished from our lives, but simply as hurting individuals who are in need. We can then be unrestrained in attempting to meet that need, freely giving them what they were trying to take, and then going the extra mile and openhandedly giving them twice as much. We can, in other words, treat an apparent enemy with the love, profound concern, and bighearted generosity that we would normally reserve for our dearest friends. We have thus collapsed our social circles by harboring the same unqualified love for everyone. We have stopped responding to different people differently. We have replaced self-concern as our guiding principle with concern for the other. We have stepped outside the universal template for human life.

We have ventured into this no-man’s land because this, we believe, is where God lives. This God is fundamentally different than the God tradition taught us to believe in. This God does

not treat people according to how they measure up to his demands; he does not behave like an egocentric human. He thus does not draw the saints to his bosom while casting the unrepentant sinners into the lake of everlasting fire. Astonishingly, he treats everyone the same. His love is like the sun, shining indiscriminately on good and bad alike. When someone turns against him, his love turns not to vengeance, but to *oiktirmōn*, tender mercy and compassion. He reaches out to that person in the same way that Jesus calls us to do, with an extravagant generosity that takes no thought for anything but that this person is in need and that this need must be met. No length is too far to go. Treating the sinner in this way demonstrates that God too has no circles of decreasing proximity. Everyone, even the worst of us, has an honored place in the innermost circle of his love.

By loving in the extraordinary way God loves, we become like him. We claim our place in his inner circle, and all that goes along with it. We now can greet life with a carefree joy, regardless of how things look on the outside. We can laugh in the face of danger and give when others would call it reckless. For we are now God's sons, and all that he has is ours.

What do we make of this vision?

At the very least, I believe that the interpretation I have laid out roughly reflects the understanding of the editor of Q¹. The sayings strung together by this editor clearly express the overall themes of responding to others generously based on their need, rather than reciprocally based on our self-interest. Three of the blocks ("Love Your Enemies," "Renouncing One's Own Rights," and "Impartial Love") contain the specific theme of responding to outer circle people with an inner circle love. And two of them ("Love Your Enemies" and "Being Full of Pity like Your Father") ask us to display this kind of love because that is how God is. There is clearly a unified vision here.

Yet I do not see how this vision could not have ultimately traced back to Jesus. Not only is this the heart of the Inaugural Sermon in our "most important source for reconstructing the teaching of Jesus" (Theissen & Merz, 1998, p. 29), not only does it contain more sayings voted "red" ("Jesus undoubtedly said this or something very like it") by the Jesus Seminar than any other discourse in the gospels, but it is just too distinctive, too breathtakingly original. In one giant stride it steps outside a host of consensus assumptions: about the character of God, about the psychology of attack, about self-concern vs. other-concern as one's guiding principle, about the architecture of a human life. In describing the uniqueness of its central precept, Roy Hoover, co-author of *The Five Gospels*, says

The admonition to love your enemies is truly extraordinary. It...exceeds all of the enlightened and prudent advice discoverable in Ancient Near Eastern and Graeco-Roman literature that urges humane treatment of the enemy. (2002, p. 54)

Who is this religious genius who shatters so many universal assumptions at once? Surely it must be the figure whom the tradition remembered in such exalted terms, as the man who, above all others, was like God.

Indeed, this vision cuts so against the normal human grain that it was soon buried. In the second layer of Q, the apocalyptic Q², all the old themes come flooding back in. We have a firebrand Jesus threatening with divine wrath the Galilean towns who rejected his message: "For Tyre and Sidon it shall be more bearable at the judgment than for you. And you, Capernaum, up to heaven will you be exalted? Into Hades shall you come down!" (Q 10:14-15). Indeed, he calls

down God's judgment not just on the impenitent locals but on the entire generation: "so that a settling of accounts for the blood of all the prophets poured out from the founding of the world may be required of this generation" (Q 11:50). Robinson observes,

One must take seriously the substantive—theological and ethical—tension between the two main layers in Q, that of the archaic clusters [Q¹], and that of the final redaction [Q²]. Jesus' vision of a caring Father who is infinitely forgiving and hence shockingly evenhanded in dealing with the bad as well as the good, may have been lost from sight a generation later. (2007, pp. 16-17)

Elsewhere, Robinson puts it more strongly: "Jesus' amazing vision of God seems to have been completely lost from sight by the redaction of Q, and hence in the Gospel of Matthew!" (2007, p. 137).

What, then, are we to make of this "amazing vision," which was so extreme that even followers within the living memory of Jesus couldn't hold onto it? Whatever else we say, however challenged we may feel by it, whatever objections we may have to it, we have to admit that it is intensely beautiful. It calls us to the absolute highest within us. One can scarcely imagine a more radical reversal of human egotism. And it *believes* in the highest within us. It assumes we actually have the capacity to love our enemies.

True, it does seem ridiculously unattainable, for us as well as for its original audience. You have to admit there is something a bit incongruous about calling first-century peasants to attain the egolessness of a Zen master or a Christian saint. Clearly, he saw something in them that we don't see in anyone, least of all in ourselves. Yet what if we are just blind to what he had eyes to see?

What, then, do we do with these injunctions? I believe we need to appreciate that their primary calling is to a state of mind, from which, once attained, extreme behaviors will flow naturally. Loving your enemies, or anyone else, is not a behavior; it is a feeling. Real love cannot be faked. The appropriate response, then, is not simply to ape the behaviors—to give twice as much whenever someone tries to take from us. Without the inner state, those behaviors truly could be foolhardy and even dangerous. They certainly would be hollow. The appropriate response, I believe, is to take up the arduous task of walking toward that inner state, of seeking that wholesale transformation of character to which Jesus called us. Only as we begin to approximate that new condition do those radical behaviors become natural, authentic, and truly appropriate. Only then do they become more than notches on our crucifix, but something that has power to actually transform the enemy, just as Jean Valjean was transformed.

An antidote for the world's ills

Yet even as just a goal, a lofty summit that we are slowly climbing toward, this vision, I believe, is a genuine antidote for what ails the world. J. Harold Ellens has written eloquently about his "conviction that the main psychosocial and political problem in modern and postmodern culture arises from the apocalyptic worldview willed to us by that ancient ambiguous religion" (2007a, p. 2). He describes the effects of that apocalyptic worldview:

The worst of all this is that religious metaphors that we have been given in the dominant report about God's nature and behavior, produce unconscious psychological archetypes in human beings, which get acted out unsuspectingly in behavior that is

justified by those metaphors. If God solves all his ultimate problems by quick resort to ultimate violence, how is it possible that we can expect humans to do significantly differently? Sick gods make sick people. If God persuades us of his psychotic notion that he is caught in a cosmic conflict, the battleground of which is human history and the human heart, of course it is inevitable that we shall wish, unconsciously or consciously, to help him out; to be on his side in the war; to undertake God's cause against the infidel, to fight the bad guys, to exterminate our enemies, as apparently God tries to do with his. (2007b, p. 3)

The logic is inescapable: If God exterminates enemies, then must we not do likewise? As Ellens says, "Monster gods make monster people" (2007b, p. 2). What is so striking, of course, about Jesus' vision in Q is that his picture of God and consequently of appropriate human behavior is the precise and diametric reverse of this. It is as sublime as the apocalyptic worldview is monstrous.

Imagine, then, that Jesus' vision had stuck, that rather than being swallowed up by the "Master Story of Western culture" (Ellens, 2007a, p. 4) centered on divine violence, it had become the heart of a new Master Story centered on divine impartial love. What kind of people would that new Master Story have produced? What kind of *world* might it have produced? So much of the suffering in the world is that which we unnecessarily inflict on each other. Guided by a narrow sense of self-interest, we cast most people outside the inner circle of our hearts. The lines that mark off the outer circles become rifts in our personal lives and battle lines in our international affairs. The private seed of spite that quietly draws the circles can easily burst forth into full-blown violence, even on a global scale. The painful effects of those circles, then, are all around us. Those effects define our world. Therefore, in calling us to love our enemies, Jesus was calling us to a different kind of world. Imagine a world in which the multitudes of Jesus' followers passionately believed that rather than destroying the enemy in God's name, we should genuinely love the enemy, again in God's name. How might the world have been different if this vision had been held onto? How *could* it be different if this vision were recovered?

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