

# An Exegetical Note On Luke 17:21

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A number of versions of the Bible translate the last part of this verse, "The kingdom of God is among you" (*NEB, Jerusalem Bible*) or "in your midst" (*NSAB, RSV*). Others translate, "The kingdom of God is within you," and add a footnote "or, is among you" (*KJV, NIV, The Living Bible, Good News Bible, God's Word to the Nations*).

As Lutherans we are inclined to like the translation "within you" for several reasons. This is the sense of Luther's translation, "*inwendig in euch*." Also, Luke 17:21 is often quoted to prove that God's kingdom is invisible because it is God's rule by his Word in the hearts of believers.<sup>1</sup> It will be the contention of this study, however, that since neither of the two translations can be proven beyond a doubt to be the correct one, we need to be cautious in using this verse as a proof passage inasmuch as it may not mean "within you."

The preposition ἐντός used in the clause in question can properly be translated either "within" or "among." Since none of the other gospel writers recorded this same incident, there is no parallel passage to throw some light on the meaning of ἐντός in Luke 17:21. The only other use of ἐντός in the NT occurs in Matthew 23:26. There ἐντός is used to refer to the inside of a cup. Since it is not a parallel usage to that in Luke 17:21, however, it is of no help in deciding the meaning of this preposition in the Luke passage.

In his grammar, Robertson states that Liddell and Scott give only the meaning "within" for ἐντός.<sup>2</sup> Robertson also says that the two quotations from Xenophon which are often cited as proof that ἐντός means "among" are disputed. But a closer examination of Liddell and Scott and of the Xenophon quotations shows that the meaning "among" is a possibility. None of the uses cited by Liddell and Scott, however, and neither of the Xenophon quotations are uses which are parallel to that in Luke; so they do not prove anything either way.

Bauer-Arndt-Gingrich cites a number of passages in the Septuagint (Ps 38:4 [39:3]; 102 [103]:1; 108 [109]:22) in which ἐντός is used with a personal pronoun meaning within a person or in a person's heart. But in the Symmachus translation of the Old Testament, ἐντός is used in three passages which indicate the meaning "among": Lamentations 1:3, Psalm 87:16; 140:5.<sup>3</sup>

The early translations are not particularly helpful either. The Old Latin translations and the Syriac Peshitto translate with the sense of "within." But the older Syriac versions (syr<sup>s</sup> and syr<sup>c</sup>) translate "among."

Moulton-Milligan cites a saying of Jesus (P Oxy IV, 654) where a wording occurs (ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν ἐντός ὑμῶν [ἐ]στι) which is similar to that in Luke 17:21. Although the context of this "saying" favors the translation "within you," Moulton-Milligan does not consider this conclusive. Instead, the comment is made, "We have no citation which throws any light on the much disputed meaning of ἐντός ὑμῶν in Lk 17:21."<sup>4</sup>

From all this it is clear that the usage of the preposition ἐντός provides no clear-cut answer to the meaning of this word in our passage. We are left, then, to consider whether the context helps us decide between the two possible meanings.

It has been argued that the words μετὰ παρατηρήσεως ("with observation" [*KJV*], "visibly" [*NIV*], or with the sense of "with visible signs" [*RSV, NASB*]) decide the matter since this is spoken by Jesus in contrast to "within you." The argument goes something like this: παρατηρήσεως speaks of a person observing something outside himself, so ἐντός refers to what is inside the person. A counterargument sees two problems with this interpretation: 1) The meaning of παρατηρήσεως does not stress external seeing; it speaks only of someone looking for something which is observable (e.g., a doctor looking for symptoms of a disease, astronomers observing the movement of the sun, moon and stars). 2) It introduces an insurmountable problem, namely, the people "within" whom the kingdom would exist would be the unbelieving Pharisees. The Pharisees had asked Jesus about the coming of God's kingdom (v 20); and Luke says that when Jesus spoke, he was answering them directly (ἀπεκρίθη αὐτοῖς). In verse 22 Jesus speaks to a new group, his disciples. So the most natural understanding of the people meant by "you" in the expression "within you" would be the Pharisees.<sup>5</sup>

The second part of this counterargument is not conclusive either, however. In the middle of his statement, Jesus introduces a future verb with a more general subject: "Nor will people say...( οὐδε ἔροῦσιν)." So the "you" used with ἐντὸς does not have to be limited to the Pharisees. Instead, Jesus could simply be saying that when the kingdom comes, no one will have to point it out to people because the kingdom will be within the hearts of the people to whom the kingdom came.

The argument and counterargument swirling around the words "observation" and "you" are inconclusive, but the debate does raise the question of what is meant by the expression "the kingdom of God" in this exchange between the Pharisees and Jesus in verses 20-22. Does the "kingdom of God" mean the coming of the Messiah and his work which would mark the end of God's special covenant with Israel and the dawn of the new covenant God would establish? Luke does use the expression this way in 9:27; 10:9,11; 11:20; 16:16; and 23:51. This meaning would fit well with ἐντὸς being translated "among you." Or does "kingdom of God" mean the result of the Messiah's work as God rules by his Word in the hearts of believers? Luke uses the expression this way in 7:28; 13:18,20; and 18:16. This meaning fits well with the translation "within you."

Again, arguments and counterarguments on this point are inconclusive. The Pharisees' question in verse 20 surely refers to the coming of the Messiah. But could Jesus say that the coming of the Messiah could not be observed and that no one could say, "Here he is!"? He himself pointed out to the Pharisees that what they observed with their eyes told them the Messiah was present among them (Lk 11:20 and Mt 12:28; Jn 10:38). The whole ministry of John was to proclaim the presence of the Messiah and to introduce him to many with the words, "Behold, the Lamb of God!" On the other hand, if Jesus is referring to God's rule in the hearts of believers, isn't he answering the Pharisees' question by making a statement about a facet of God's kingdom which was different from that which was the intent of their question?

Sometimes if the immediate context of a verse does not decide the matter, what precedes or follows may be of some help. At first, Jesus' words to the disciples in verses 22-24 may seem to have some bearing on verse 21 because he does speak of "seeing" one of the days of the Son of Man and of people saying, "There he is!" or, "Here he is!" These words are not a parallel, however, because in verses 22-24 it is apparent that Jesus is speaking of his second coming in the future while in verse 21 Jesus uses a verb in the present tense (ἐστίν, "is") with ἐντὸς ὑμῶν. Whether we translate "among" or "within," Jesus is speaking in verses 20 and 21 of God's kingdom in time and not of the eternal kingdom of God which will be ushered in by the Savior's return at the end of time.

What do we do in an instance like this if both word usage and context do not give us a clear-cut decision between two possible meanings of the passage? The best thing to do is what most of the translations have done: give one meaning in the text and note the other in a footnote.

But which one should appear in the text? This writer feels that the meaning "within you" is still the one that should appear in the text as the KJY, the NIV and other translations have it. Although usage does establish "among" as a possible meaning, the basic meaning of the word and the majority of the uses of the word in classical and Koine Greek favor the meaning "within." Also, although the context poses a few problems for the meaning "within," these problems are more easily overcome than the problem posed by the meaning "among."

"Within you" does not have to refer to the Pharisees as such because the verb ἐροῦσιν earlier in the verse introduces a more general meaning to the whole verse. Furthermore, Jesus' change of the focus of the expression "kingdom of God" from the way the Pharisees used it in their question to the way he used it in his answer would not be the only time Jesus had corrected their unbelieving notions by giving them something to think about which was slightly different from what they had asked (cf Lk 5:30-32; 6:2,5; 11:15, 16,19,20; 11:38-41.)

On the other hand, the meaning "among you" or "in your midst" requires that "kingdom of God" means the presence of the Messiah. While it can be said that the Pharisees failed to see that the Messiah was present among them because they were looking for a worldly Messiah who would come with great fanfare to end the oppression of the Romans, this does not seem to be what Jesus is telling them. Jesus' words speak of a truth which has a more general application than their unbelief. Jesus' words indicate that there is no observation which a person can make to detect the coming of God's rule of grace and *no one* will be heralding it by saying it is here or there. This was a truth Jesus also pointed out to Nicodemus when he told him, "The wind blows

wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit" (Jn 3:8).

What is the point of this brief study of Luke 17:21? Only to speak the caution that it is the better part of wisdom not to use this passage as proof positive that God's kingdom is his invisible rule in our hearts as believers. We are easily tempted to do so because, although other passages teach this truth clearly, none does it quite so simply or clearly as this one seems to do. The possibility that ἐντὸς does have a different meaning should lead us to avoid the use of Luke 17:21 as our primary or only passage when teaching this important truth. If it is the primary or only passage we use, someone may challenge the meaning we ascribe to this verse. It would be best for us to avoid the embarrassment or lengthy debate which may result from such a challenge by using Luke 17:21 as a secondary or follow-up passage instead.

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<sup>1</sup> *Luther's Catechism* (WELS Board for Parish Education, 1982), pp 166, 207, 300; and Edward W. A. Koehler, *A Summary of Christian Doctrine* (River Forest: Koehler Pub. Co., 1939), pp 108, 121.

<sup>2</sup> A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (New York and London: Harper & Brothers, 1923), p 621.

<sup>3</sup> See Paul Bretscher, "Luke 17:20,21 in Recent Investigations," *Concordia Theological Monthly*, 1951, p 902.

<sup>4</sup> James Hope Moulton and George Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek New Testament Illustrated from the Papyri and Other Non-literary Sources* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1914-1929), p 218.

<sup>5</sup> Paul Bretscher, "Luke 17:21," *Concordia Theological Monthly*, 1944, pp 734-736.