

TWENTY FOURTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME, 2026

We are reminded in Sirach that wrath and anger are hateful, though the sinner holds them tight. There may be some original justification for anger in many cases, but holding anger tight only burns us. There is always a need for justice, but a quest for vengeance is always wicked and self destructive. Anger burns, and the Sacred Scriptures assure us that the vengeful will suffer the Lord's vengeance.

The difference between vengeance and justice confuses many people, but the difference is actually quite simple. Vengeance is personal and may not be according to law or directed by reason. Justice is communal, is always directed by reason, and is, except in extreme circumstances, according to law.

Vengeance is about feeling personally satisfied, whereas justice is about safeguarding the community and its essential standards. We have no right before God or man to inflict harm on another in pursuit of personal satisfaction, however many movies suggest the contrary. We, as individuals, are not authorized to punish anyone for anything. On the other hand, even if we forgive someone for a crime against us, it does not follow that the culprits should not be punished. We should forgive those who have harmed us; but if the harm done to us was also a crime, justice requires that the community be protected and its standards publicly vindicated. Crime is to be dealt with by justice, not vengeance. Justice seeks to protect the community and uphold its standards, not to make us feel personal satisfaction. On the other hand, crime is to be dealt with even when we personally forgive, since the community still needs to be defended and its standards must be publicly upheld.

Vengeance is about emotion, but justice is about reason. It is immoral to inflict harm in order to experience emotional satisfaction. Justice seeks to judge reasonably what must be done to protect the community, and to show that its standards are not to be despised. An old friend of mine and I have fond memories of late childhood in the late 1970s, a late childhood which included episodes of the original "Star Trek" in syndication. I am afraid that we had more of a taste for its fight scenes than perhaps we should have ("Amok Time!"), but my late childhood self might have got a good lesson or two from it. For one thing, it struck me that there needs to be something "Vulcan" about the law. One's emotions may go wrong and stray into vengeance, or they may go right and sail into forgiveness, but the law's business is neither vengeance nor forgiveness. The law's business, according to reason, is to punish crime sufficiently to protect the community and its standards, no more, and no less.

Justice, especially for a Christian, has nothing whatsoever to do with hatred. Hatred for a human being is always sinful, since every human being is made in the image and likeness of God and has been redeemed the Lamb of God.

How can you tell that you hate someone, and are therefore falling dangerously into sin? Do you want something bad to happen to someone? If you do, you hate that person, and are opening yourself up to evil. Are you pleased when something bad happens to someone? If you are, you hate that person, and are opening yourself up to evil. Even if that person sinned against you, by hating and opening yourself up to evil, you are running the risk of going to hell, the home of hatred, while that person, if repentant, goes to Heaven, the home of Love.

Hatred leads to hell, even if our hatred originates in a real hurt we suffered. To many movies show the "hero" taking personal pleasure in the suffering and death he inflicts on those who harmed him. What they are showing is hatred, which means that they are preaching the

“gospel” of hell. To take delight in the suffering or death of another is always an evil thing. Again, this is quite distinct both from justice and from the necessary defense of oneself or another. We open ourselves up to the influence of hell when we hate. We open ourselves to the power of Heaven when we forgive. Forgiveness is entirely forswearing any personal revenge, and resolving to take no pleasure in another’s sufferings. It is not inconsistent with doing what is truly necessary to defend ourselves or others from clear and present threats. Still less is it inconsistent with justice, which seeks, according to reason, to protect the community from harm and to uphold publicly that community’s essential standards.

When it comes to ourselves, we, as disciples of the Lord Jesus, absolutely must forgive, even as we seek God’s forgiveness for our own sins. To make this point entirely clear, the Lord Jesus told the parable we heard today, the Parable of the Unmerciful Servant, one of the most dramatic of His parables.

The Lord Jesus deliberately used extreme numbers in His parable, something that, unfortunately, the New American Bible translation obscures. The New American Bible says that the Unmerciful Servant owed the king “a huge amount,” but St. Matthew’s text actually says that the Servant owed the king “ten thousand talents.” Now, one talent - ONE talent - was six thousand denarii. That means that the Unmerciful Servant owed the king sixty million denarii. Consider that one denarius was a day’s wage for an unskilled laborer. A day’s wage for sixty million unskilled laborers was basically one day’s payroll for the entire Roman Empire. One talent kept a standard battleship in service for a month. Ten thousand talents was enough to run the entire Roman navy for several years. Absurd! The Unmerciful Servant owed the king a ridiculously large amount of money, utterly beyond possible repayment. Mercifully, the king forgave that tremendous debt. Then came a fellow servant who owed the first 100 denarii. One hundred versus sixty million! The New American Bible is actually rather inept to render this “a much smaller amount.” One hundred versus sixty million: The second servant owed the first .0001667% of what he owed the king! The situation was absurd. The man who just got forgiven sixty million is strangling the man who owed him a hundred. No wonder the king was outraged.

The Lord Jesus used these dramatic numbers to make an important point. What anyone owes to us is insignificant compared to what we owe to God, namely, life, the universe, and everything. Irrationally, acting only on the emotion of wrath, the first Servant demanded full payment of what was due him. Emotionally, he wanted revenge. Reasonably, he should have recognized the absurdity of failing to pass on a little bit of the awesome mercy the king showed to him. In this passage, the Unmerciful Servant is as lacking in rationality as he is in compassion. Obeying the emotion of anger, he becomes simply ridiculous.

Forgive your brother, the Lord Jesus tells us. Don’t give into anger, and seek no revenge. Don’t think that you need to obstruct public justice. That would be another kind of sin. The community must be defended and its norms upheld. Quite simply, abandon completely any thought of personal revenge. Reject any desire to get personal emotional satisfaction by exacting your pound of flesh. Lay aside anger, and pray for the grace to lift up to the words Jesus gave us for our daily prayer, “Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.”