

Retribution:

A Daring New Direction

7th Sunday of Ordinary Time – Year A

Leviticus 19:1-2, 17-18
Psalms 103:1-2, 3-4, 8, 10, 12-13

*1 Corinthians 3:16-23***
Matthew 5:38-48

In the original 1981 cinematic production of *Clash of the Titans*, the deformed monster Calibos, his hand cut off by the hero, Perseus, prays before the statue of his mother, the goddess, Thetis. In a fit of anguish he cries out against Perseus, "I demand justice!" His mother's response is terse, and to the point: "Justice, or revenge?"

Passions regarding the subject of retribution can be extremely vibrant, particularly in a society in which justice is often equated with retribution and revenge. In addition to strong emotions where the commission of crimes is concerned, for better or for worse we are also a society of lawsuits, liabilities and torts, all pursued under the auspices of justice. While our feelings may run strong, as may our anger at perpetrators of such crimes that leave a wounded victim in its wake, how often, in our quest for justice, do we consider God's law, and Christ's teaching, which calls us to a different consideration?

Chapter 34 of the Book of Genesis tells the troubling story of how Jacob's daughter, Dinah, is raped by Shechem, the son of Hamor. In retribution for her defilement, two of Dinah's brothers, Simeon

and Levi lead a raid against Hamor's tribe in which they murder Hamor, Shechem and all the males in the tribe, carrying off the tribe's wealth, including the women and children; all to avenge their sister's dishonor.

In such an ancient age in which tribal rivalries and wars were commonplace, as were blood debts paid for the restoration of honor, God brought forth a revolutionary command which put a curb on the degree to which retribution is sought and carried out -- "*an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth...*" (Exodus 21:24).

Chances are the proponents of capital punishment will quote this passage from Exodus 21:24. However, what does Sacred Scripture say regarding the issue of retribution, inclusive of the death penalty? What would such a command

have meant for the ancient Hebrews, and other tribes and cultures of the time? What would such a command have meant at such periods in our own nation's history when the fighting of duels was a common means of restoring one's honor? What would it mean to us today where honor is often restored, or retribution sought, in the courtroom?

To begin with, the complete passage from Exodus reads, "*if injury ensues, you shall give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for*

*"...an eye for an eye,
a tooth for a tooth..."*

~ Exodus 21:24 ~

Forgiveness

burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe” (Exod 21:23-25). Many interpret this passage as a prescription for retribution. However, an interesting point about this passage, especially in light of the culture of the time, as illustrated in the story of Dinah, is that many scholars interpret it not as a prescription, but rather a *limit* to retribution. In short, one is to take no *more* than an eye for an eye, and no *more* than a tooth for a tooth. In the case of murder, in which one tribe or faction might slaughter an entire tribe for the commission of a single offense, one is to take *no more* than a life for a life. Upon further reflection of such a command, one can easily conclude that acceptable retribution in the eyes of God could, perhaps, be to take *less*. [Even the Book of Leviticus commands: “Take no revenge and cherish no grudge...” (Lev 19:18).]

This is unmistakably the path Jesus is taking during His Sermon on the Mount when He directly quotes the Exodus passage regarding retaliation and retribution (Matt 5:38-42) -- “*you have heard it said, An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.*” He does not, however, end there. Rather than setting a limit, Jesus commands his followers to seek a lesser retaliation to the point of seeking no retribution at all: “*...I say to you, offer no resistance to injury. When someone strikes you on [your] right cheek, turn the other one to him as well.*” While on the surface Jesus’ command may appear to be absurdly impractical, we cannot deny the direction He is taking us in dealing with retribution and punishment, including the death penalty. As Jesus further expands on this teaching -- “*If anyone wants to go to*

law with you over your tunic, hand over your cloak as well...love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matt 5:44) -- we recognize the undeniable path Jesus is taking. We are to be a people of reconciliation, not retribution.

As difficult and unrealistic as God’s expectation may be to our limited human capacity, Jesus further compounds His command by linking it to our very identity as His followers. We are to avoid hatred and retribution because “*the tax collectors do the same*” and “*the pagans do as much*” We are to shun revenge, embrace forgiveness, and pray for those who might otherwise draw our retribution “*that [we] may be children of [our] heavenly Father*” (Matt 5:45).

This is not to say that Christ is asking us to look for further injury; nor are Christ and the Church excluding the possibility of punishment and accountability. Even where violent crime is concerned, it is the teaching of the Church that society and its leaders are morally bound to protect its citizens (Catechism of the Catholic Church, #2265-2266).

What we see, rather, in both Scripture and Church teaching is a limit to how retribution is to be sought. In the end, we are called to choose a different, more Christian path; one in which we advocate justice and accountability through forgiveness and reconciliation, while leaving punishment, even, perhaps especially, the extreme punishment of death, to the wisdom, judgment and mercy of God.

Fr. William Nicholas
February 18, 2011

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~ Matt 5:38-42 ~