



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE FOURTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, AUGUST 30, 2026

EXODUS 3:1-15; PSALM 105:1-6, 23-26, 45C; ROMANS 12:9-21; MATTHEW 16:21-28

LEAVE ROOM FOR THE WRATH OF GOD(?)

Romans 12:9-21 *[Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. 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." No, "if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.]*

"Vengeance is mine...", says the Lord."

Oh.

Ok...

"Vengeance is mine, I will repay," says the Lord."

Wowzer.

Is that, is that the gospel? Does that sound like good news to you?

I suppose it comes down to who or what you think might be facing the business end of

God's vengeance – and whatever God's vengeance may be.

"I will repay," says the Lord. "Leave room for the wrath of God."

Paul is referencing Deuteronomy and God's promise to vindicate God's People from all that would seek to destroy Israel. Now in Romans Chapter 12, he's borrowing this language to address the Church in Rome.

How did the early church hear this? How do we hear it today?

On one level, Paul makes it clear that without exception God wants Christians to keep our noses out of the judgment business. It's clearly spelled out: this is God's domain.

If only the church had a better track record with respecting this non-negotiable distinction. Even so, there's something unsettling about all this talk of wrath and vengeance in the middle of what otherwise sounds like a saintly operator's manual for Christian living. A mentor of mine would have called this – and please forgive my crassness here – a turd in the punchbowl.

One of these things is not like the other in the refreshment Paul is serving up for us here.

If, as Christians we're meant to repay our hungry enemies with food and our thirsty enemies with drink, and if we are called to live peaceably and harmoniously, and never act without first giving thought to what is noble in the sight of everyone, what do we do with our resentments, our anger, our natural desire for revenge, our human impulse to repay vengeance with vengeance?

Here's one problem with Paul's unfortunate party punch. At a surface level, it looks like we have to practice a pretty robust piety while God acts on instincts we can well understand. Why are Christians denied all the cathartic impulses that scratch our evolutionary itch for survival of the fittest?

Well, because, at a deeper level, of course, this base, animalistic behavior is antithetical to our Christian vocation, and we know that. Sometimes it's hard, but we know that.

And it gives us another punch problem to reckon with – if wrath and vengeance as payback is inconsistent with following the Way of Jesus, how are we to reconcile with the notion that God gets away with vengeance, cruelty, and violence?

Of course, we must concede that we don't understand the workings of God – and we don't. We're told that what may seem to us like base behavior on God's part may just be God acting at a higher level of purpose beyond our ken.

And that may be. But there's still something inadequate about this as an end to the argument. A God who suffers as Jesus did on the cross, is not a God who inflicts suffering. If we can't trust these fundamental attributes of God's nature, whose image and likeness all humans bear, we are lost.

And yet the faith into which the gospel invites us is a faith of finding, belonging, and homecoming. The gospel is trustworthy beyond our imagining, especially unto its capacity to transform the meaning of our suffering into newness of life.

I'm struck by spiritual movements within some Christian circles that reject any concept of a retributive God because it smacks of dualism. It fails to transcend the limits by either/or thinking, and it seeks to go beyond notions of vengeance and retribution – surely these are baser instincts in the spiritual evolution of humans.

Perhaps. And where retributive justice can soften and grow into restorative justice in non-dual Christian philosophy, it has much good to teach us.

This doesn't mean there isn't a place or a call or a time for God to set things right, to repair what's broken, to hold to account that which must be held to account.

The oppression we see in the world today – in our own nation – surely, there must be a rebalancing of great injustices – there must be hope for change, even now.

As Christians we join Mary in professing a new day where the mighty are pulled down from their thrones and the lowly are lifted up. There are binaries – healthy binaries – in the gospel, as we can see.

But, there are those in our tradition, too, who would take dualistic certainty too far, to where they seem to build their faith on a sharp justice binary of salvation and damnation. At the end of the day, it's pearly

gates or lake of fire. The giving of God's mercy, they say, will one day be over.

Perhaps extremes in all directions actually fail to leave room for God's vengeance, whatever that may be.

The vengeance of God is not the vengeance of humankind. This is where we begin to discern that Paul's punchbowl and its contents, if I haven't stretched the analogy too far – is not what it initially seems to be. There is a consistent logic, a patterning, a sanity to the Way of Jesus.

On this we must and can depend. It is in every way and always at cross purposes with the world of empire and domination, but it can be trusted, relied on, and recognized for the real hope that it brings to the oh-so-hurting and broken world as we know it.

"I will repay," says the Lord. "Leave room for the wrath of God."

Now it begins to make sense. I don't know about you, but I see much in this world that only God can repay. What if leaving room for God's wrath is a kind of surrender of our wrath into the care of God's wrath? This isn't to let it go, but to use it, paired with a bigger cause, a larger concern, a community of faith.

This might be part of what it means to carry our cross, to borrow that complicated concept from our gospel reading. I know

you've heard it preached from this pulpit before, but never, and I mean never, does the phrase "carry your cross" subject anyone to the violence, cruelty, or manipulation of someone else's idea of what your burden should look and feel like.

In a way, we carry our cross to leave room for God's just wrath. And we carry our cross to join with other Christians in the call to walk in the way of the cross together. The cross is never carried in isolation – not even Jesus carried his cross alone. And whatever our burdens may be, they are borne by the cross and not on our backs, our insecurities, our fears.

We carry the cross of Christ as members of the Body of Christ to bring good news to the world.

Somehow, some way, part of that good news is our command to leave room for God's vengeance.

Perhaps the best way to square the circle is to go back and read Romans 12 itself. Paul is contextualizing the hard stuff. He seems to be saying, leave all that, the impossible, to God. Here's what we're to do:

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil; hold fast to what is good. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Do not be overcome by evil but overcome evil with good.

Overcome evil with good.

What can at first glance seem like a moral list — a high code of ethics that you don't have to be Christian to abide by, becomes our Christian duty when we adopt it as our guide to participate in God's justice for the world.

When God says, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay," God is assuring us that we don't – and we can't – and we never will, fight for God's justice alone.

