



On Vengeance

Thomas Aquinas

1. Whether vengeance is lawful?

Objection 1: It seems that vengeance is not lawful. For whoever usurps what is God's sins. But vengeance belongs to God, for it is written: "Revenge to Me, and I will repay." Therefore all vengeance is unlawful.

Objection 2: Further, he that takes vengeance on a man does not bear with him. But we ought to bear with the wicked, for a gloss on Cant 2.2: "As the lily among the thorns," says: "He is not a good man that cannot bear with a wicked one." Therefore we should not take vengeance on the wicked.

Objection 3: Further, vengeance is taken by inflicting punishment, which is the cause of servile fear. But the New Law is not a law of fear, but of love, as Augustine states. Therefore at least in the New Testament all vengeance is unlawful.

Objection 4: Further, a man is said to avenge himself when he takes revenge for wrongs inflicted on himself. But, seemingly, it is unlawful even for a judge to punish those who have wronged him: for Chrysostom says: "Let us learn after Christ's example to bear our own wrongs with magnanimity, yet not to suffer God's wrongs, not even by listening to them." Therefore vengeance seems to be unlawful.

Objection 5: Further, the sin of a multitude is more harmful than the sin of only one: for it is written: "Of three things my heart hath been afraid . . . the accusation of a city, and the gathering together of the people, and a false calumny." But vengeance should not be taken on the sin of a multitude, for a gloss on Matthew 13:29-30: "Lest perhaps . . . you root up the wheat...suffer both to grow," says that "a multitude should not be excommunicated, nor should the sovereign." Neither therefore is any other vengeance lawful.

On the contrary, We should look to God for nothing save what is good and lawful. But we are to look to God for vengeance on His enemies: for it is written: "Will not God revenge His elect who cry to Him day and night?" as if to say: "He will indeed." Therefore vengeance is not essentially evil and unlawful.

I answer that, Vengeance consists in the infliction of a penal evil on one who has sinned. Accordingly, in the matter of vengeance, we must consider the mind of the avenger. For if his intention is directed chiefly to the evil of the person on whom he takes vengeance and rests there, then his vengeance is altogether unlawful: because to take pleasure in another's evil belongs to hatred, which is contrary to the charity whereby we are bound to love all men. Nor is it an excuse that he intends the evil of one who has unjustly inflicted evil on him, as neither is a man excused for hating one that hates him: for a man may not sin against another just because the latter has already sinned against him, since this is to be overcome by evil, which was forbidden by the Apostle, who says: "Be not overcome by evil, but overcome evil by good."

If, however, the avenger's intention be directed chiefly to some good, to be obtained by means of the punishment of the person who has sinned (for instance that the sinner may amend, or at least that he may be restrained and others be not disturbed, that justice may be upheld, and God honored), then vengeance may be lawful, provided other due circumstances be observed.

Reply to Objection 1: He who takes vengeance on the wicked in keeping with his rank and

position does not usurp what belongs to God but makes use of the power granted him by God. For it is written of the earthly prince that “he is God’s minister, an avenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil.” If, however, a man takes vengeance outside the order of divine appointment, he usurps what is God’s and therefore sins.

Reply to Objection 2: The good bear with the wicked by enduring patiently, and in due manner, the wrongs they themselves receive from them: but they do not bear with them as to endure the wrongs they inflict on God and their neighbor. For Chrysostom says: “It is praiseworthy to be patient under our own wrongs, but to overlook God’s wrongs is most wicked.”

Reply to Objection 3: The law of the Gospel is the law of love, and therefore those who do good out of love, and who alone properly belong to the Gospel, ought not to be terrorized by means of punishment, but only those who are not moved by love to do good, and who, though they belong to the Church outwardly, do not belong to it in merit.

Reply to Objection 4: Sometimes a wrong done to a person reflects on God and the Church: and then it is the duty of that person to avenge the wrong. For example, Elias made fire descend on those who were come to seize him; likewise Eliseus cursed the boys that mocked; and Pope Sylvester excommunicated those who sent him into exile. But in so far as the wrong inflicted on a man affects his person, he should bear it patiently if this be expedient. For these precepts of patience are to be understood as referring to preparedness of the mind, as Augustine states.

Reply to Objection 5: When the whole multitude sins, vengeance must be taken on them, either in respect of the whole multitude—thus the Egyptians were drowned in the Red Sea while they were pursuing the children of Israel, and the people of Sodom were entirely destroyed—or as regards part of the multitude, as may be seen in the punishment of those who worshipped the calf.

Sometimes, however, if there is hope of many making amends, the severity of vengeance should be brought to bear on a few of the principals, whose punishment fills the rest with fear; thus the Lord commanded the princes of the people to be hanged for the sin of the multitude.

On the other hand, if it is not the whole but only a part of the multitude that has sinned, then if the guilty can be separated from the innocent, vengeance should be wrought on them: provided, however, that this can be done without scandal to others; else the multitude should be spared and severity foregone. The same applies to the sovereign, whom the multitude follow. For his sin should be borne with, if it cannot be punished without scandal to the multitude: unless indeed his sin were such, that it would do more harm to the multitude, either spiritually or temporally, than would the scandal that was feared to arise from his punishment.

3. Whether vengeance should be carried out by conventional forms of punishment

Objection 1: It seems that vengeance should not be wrought by means of punishments customary among men. For to put a man to death is to uproot him. But our Lord forbade the uprooting of the cockle, whereby the children of the wicked one are signified. Therefore sinners should not be put to death.

Objection 2: Further, all who sin mortally seem to be deserving of the same punishment. Therefore if some who sin mortally are punished with death, it seems that all such persons should be punished with death: and this is evidently false.

Objection 3: Further, to punish a man publicly for his sin seems to publish his sin: and this would seem to have a harmful effect on the multitude, since the example of sin is taken by them as an occasion for sin. Therefore it seems that the punishment of death should not be inflicted for a sin.

On the contrary, These punishments are fixed by the divine law as appears from what we have said above (Q. 105, art 2).

I answer that, Vengeance is lawful and virtuous so far as it tends to the prevention of evil. Now some who are not influenced by motive of virtue are prevented from committing sin, through fear of losing those things which they love more than those they obtain by sinning, else

fear would be no restraint to sin. Consequently vengeance for sin should be taken by depriving a man of what he loves most. Now the things which man loves most are life, bodily safety, his own freedom, and external goods such as riches, his country and his good name. Wherefore, according to Augustine's reckoning, "[Marcus Tullius Cicero] writes that the laws recognize eight kinds of punishment": namely, "death," whereby man is deprived of life; "flogging" "retaliation," or the loss of eye for eye, whereby man forfeits his bodily safety; "slavery," and "imprisonment," whereby he is deprived of freedom; "exile" whereby he is banished from his country; "fines," whereby he is mulcted in his riches; "ignominy," whereby he loses his good name.

Reply to Objection 1: Our Lord forbids the uprooting of the cockle, when there is fear lest the wheat be uprooted together with it. But sometimes the wicked can be uprooted by death, not only without danger, but even with great profit, to the good. Wherefore in such a case the punishment of death may be inflicted on sinners.

Reply to Objection 2: All who sin mortally are deserving of eternal death, as regards future retribution, which is in accordance with the truth of the divine judgment. But the punishments of this life are more of a medicinal character; wherefore the punishment of death is inflicted on those sins alone which conduce to the grave undoing of others.

Reply to Objection 3: The very fact that the punishment, whether of death or of any kind that is fearsome to man, is made known at the same time as the sin, makes man's will avert to sin: because the fear of punishment is greater than the enticement of the example of sin.

Thomas Aquinas. *Summa Theologica* II-II, Q.108. Trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 1920.

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