

Leave Room for God's Wrath
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church
August 21, 2022-AM Service
Reverend Peter Jonker
Romans 12:9-21

So today is the ninth sermon of our series and today we focus on verse 19. *“Do not take revenge my dear friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written, ‘it is mine to avenge,’ I will repay says the Lord.”* The Holy Spirit wants us to think about vengeance. So let’s do that, and let’s recognize that there is something in us human beings that likes a little vengeance. There is something in us that’s drawn to vengeance. If you want some evidence for that spend some time at the movies. There is a whole stream of action movies that might justly be called revenge fantasies because they center around the main character getting revenge on people who have hurt them or their families. You’ve probably heard of these movies. Many of you have seen these movies.

The movie *Taken* is a revenge fantasy. Liam Neeson’s daughter is kidnapped by Albanian mobsters who plan on trafficking her. Liam Neeson, who plays a former CIA officer and Army Green Beret, travels to Europe to get her back. One after another the bad guys try to stop him. One after another he kills them until at the end of the movie he faces the head of the bad guys and he kills them too. At the end of the movie he and his daughter are back home, safe and sound. The movie *John Wick* is also a revenge fantasy. Russian Mobsters, out of sheer spite and cruelty, steal John Wick’s car and kill his puppy—a puppy given to him by his recently deceased wife. Wick (played by Keanu Reeves) sets out for revenge. Bad guy after bad guy tries to stop him, but Wick, an ex-hit man, dispatches them all with his fists and his weaponry until he finally ends up fighting hand to hand with the head of the mobsters on a dock in the New York City harbor. He kills him. After the fight, he goes to a local pet store to get a new puppy. The movie ends with them walking home together. The movie *Gladiator*, which won best picture in the year 2000, is a revenge fantasy. Russel Crow plays the Roman General Maximus. Maximus refuses to give his allegiance to the corrupt emperor Commodus who is unfit to rule. He asks simply to be able to retire. In retaliation, Commodus has his wife and children killed and Maximus sold as a slave. Through strength of mind and body, Maximus works his way back into the Coliseum so that he can confront the evil emperor. The movie ends with Maximus killing Commodus in hand to hand combat and gaining his revenge. Hollywood has made dozens and dozens of these kinds of movies. Because people love them, and they pay to watch them. These movies I just mentioned aren’t just regular movies, they are very successful movies. *John Wick* and *Taken* are movie franchises. *Gladiator* won best picture and grossed a half-billion dollars. Paul may say, “do not seek revenge my dear friends,” but we seek out revenge movies.

Why is that? Why are we drawn to these sorts of stories? Why are we drawn to revenge? We are drawn to these stories because we love justice and we want peace. We love justice. We want a world that’s fair, where there’s no cruelty and malice and hurt. We want peace. We want to live in safety with the people we love. We don’t want to have to worry about bad people harming them. And these stories tell us that if we have the will, if we are brave, if we are strong, if we are fierce and fearless, we can make the bad guys pay, we can make our families safe and we can live happily ever after. And is that so bad to want these things? If that is the promise of revenge, what’s bad about it? Why would Paul say “Do not take revenge!” when the movies make it look and feel so satisfying!?

To be clear, Paul is not against justice and peace, and the Holy Spirit is not against defeating evil and protecting the innocent. The Bible is the story of God defeating the power of evil and bringing his peace. What scripture is against is the idea that we human beings, through the force of our will and our skill, through our courage and determination, can bring about such perfect and satisfying justice. The Bible's consistent message is that we human beings can't do final justice, and furthermore, when we try to do it, when we try to be the ones who destroy evil and bring about peace, we will make a mess. God forbids revenge because we human beings are not strong enough, smart enough, or good enough to do final justice. We are broken creatures. In the middle of complicated moral situations, we don't have the smarts and the skills or the self-control to sort things out.

Don't take my word for it; listen to Jesus. Remember the parable of the wheat and the weeds (Matthew 13:24-30) Such an important parable. A farmer plants a field with good seed but in the middle of the night an enemy comes and sows weeds among the wheat. The weeds and the wheat grow up together, but when the wheat sprouts and forms heads, and the weeds don't, the workers in the field realize that the field is full of weeds. They run to the master and say, "Master your field is full of weeds, do you want us to pull them all up?" "No," said the master, "because while you are pulling up the weeds, you might uproot the wheat with them. Let them both grow together until harvest. At the harvest the wheat and the weeds will be separated and the weeds will be destroyed." The workers in the field, the servants of the master (that's us) want to do final justice. They want pull up all the weeds, because weeds are bad. The weeds harm innocent wheat. "Master let us go full John Wick on these weeds and take them out!" But the master says "No. I appreciate your enthusiasm, but you do not have the skill and the discernment necessary, and when you pull up the weeds, even though your intentions are good, you will hurt innocent people. You will do great harm to my field." That parable is Romans 12:19 in story form.

It feels like everyone is in weed pulling mode right now. That's because there are a lot of weeds out there. So when someone comes along and says, "C'mon let's get rid of these weeds! I can spot the weeds! Follow me and we'll uproot them completely!" We are drawn to that. But history shows that kind of zeal has a dark side. The Nazi's in Germany came to a society full of problems and said, "We can tell the weeds from the wheat! We need to get rid of the Jews and the communists!" They started uprooting and they did great harm. In 1917 the leaders of the communist revolution come to the people of Russia and said 'we can tell the weeds from the wheat! We need to get rid of the rulers, the rich people, the Bourgeoisie!' They started uprooting and they did great harm. "Do not seek revenge, my dear friends." We hate the weeds. And we *so* want justice and peace. But we are not smart enough to distinguish the weeds from the wheat and we are not skilled enough to separate them. So Jesus says, 'Let them grow together,' and Paul says, 'do not take revenge.'

"But wait!" you might be thinking, "Does that mean we make no judgments at all? Do we just let evil run rampant? Do we just let the weeds infest the ground? Aren't we supposed to fight against evil?" Yes, we are supposed to fight against evil, and of course we don't just let evil run rampant. But in our fight against evil there are two dangers. On the path of life there are ditches on both sides of the road.

On the one hand, there is the danger of permissiveness. When people sin we just say who am I to judge and we just leave them alone. We never confront. We never mention injustice. Obviously that gives evil way too much space. But the other danger is the danger of excessive zeal—a zeal which tries to uproot evil completely. A zeal which leads to legalism and phariseeism and inquisitions. The Bible warns against both these dangers! To warn against permissiveness

Jesus says, “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault.” Paul says “Warn a divisive person once, and then warn them a second time. After that, have nothing to do with them.” There are lots of passages where we are called to spur each other on to good works. But there are lots of passages on the other side too. “Do not judge, or you too will be judged,” says Jesus in the sermon on the mount. “If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out, or you will be destroyed by one another,” Paul says to the legalists in Galatians. And in our passage we are told, “do not take revenge, but leave room for God’s wrath.” In this book, the Holy Spirit is showing us the path of life. The path of life has ditches on both sides! The ditch of permissiveness and the ditch of judgmentalism. In our passage, the Spirit is steering us away from the ditch of judgmentalism and excessive zeal.

How do you do that? Especially when you are the victim of evil, when it’s you or your family that’s been hurt, where do you look for hope? How do you keep yourself from vengeance? You look to the wrath of God. Where’s the good news in this passage? It’s in the wrath of God. I know. That doesn’t sound like good news. How can God’s wrath be good news? Most of us don’t like to think about God being angry. Proclaiming the wrath of God isn’t fashionable these days. But there are two good reasons why knowing the wrath of God will make you a less vengeful, less judgmental person.

First, knowing that God has wrath against human sin means that you know that he will take care of things, so you don’t have to. That’s in the parable of the weeds and the wheat. The master tells his servants, “Don’t uproot the weeds, leave that to the angels at the end of time.” We may not have the smarts or the skills to do perfect justice, but God does. And when we consider God’s wrath against sin, we know that not only does God have the smarts and the skills to do perfect justice, he is bound and determined to bring this justice. When innocent people are hurt, when people lie with impunity, when the strong take advantage of the weak, when people sin with impunity, God cares. God gets angry about these things. When we see God’s wrath, we don’t have to worry about righting every wrong and settling every score and uprooting every weed, because we know that God sees the wrongs and the weeds and in his wrath he will come back and take care of business. “As it is written vengeance is mine. I WILL repay says the Lord.”

The second reason why knowing God’s wrath will make you less vengeful is that God’s wrath is not your wrath. God’s wrath is better than your wrath. No one wants to fall into the hands of human wrath, because humans are unstable and unpredictable. An angry person is usually a dangerous person, they’re liable to lash out. When we are angry we start fights, burn bridges, say things we later regret and generally make a mess. Angry people do foolish things. But God’s wrath does not suffer from the excesses of human wrath. God’s wrath gets things just right. It may be a terrible thing to fall into the hands of an angry God—as Hebrews says—but in some ways, it’s better than falling into the hands of an angry person.

Paul should know. He knows exactly what it’s like to fall into the hands of an angry God. Before he was a Christian, Paul was one of those zealous persons who thought he could uproot all the weeds. He says so in Philippians: “You want to know how zealous I was! I persecuted the church.” Paul was sure he could identify the weeds; Jesus was a weed, and every one of those Christians was a weed, and he was going to uproot them all. Then he fell into the hands of God and it was terrible. He was blinded, humiliated. His life was turned upside down. Everything he thought he knew was turned on its head. The Holy Spirit tore him down to the studs and rebuilt him. The wrath of God was hard and terrible. But Paul also found that in the middle of that wrath there was a cross. Paul fell into the hands of an angry God and found that there were holes in

those hands. And into those holes God took all his sin and all his shame and all his cruelty. And out of those holes poured a grace and mercy he didn't deserve, a mercy that washed his sin away and gave him a second chance. See, the wrath of God is way better than your wrath. So leave the vengeance and the uprooting to him.

I said earlier that revenge stories and revenge movies are so popular because they feed our desire for justice. They show us bad people getting exactly what they deserve. I get the attraction, but I think it's important to see that these movies aren't forming us in the same shape as Romans 12:19. The justice response that these movies shape in us is not the response that the Holy Spirit is forming in us. I'm not saying "You should never watch these movies!" I'm just saying be careful and be discerning.

And besides, there are better stories out there. Graham Staines was a missionary in Orissa, India. He and his family ran a leprosy mission there, caring for the poorest of the poor, and doing it in the name of Jesus. He and his wife had been doing that work for 34 years. In January of 1999, while they were driving in their car, Graham and his two sons were surrounded by Hindu nationalists and attacked. They set fire to the car and Graham and his two boys, ages ten and six, were burned alive. A horrible, horrible crime. Graham Staines left behind a wife Gladys and a daughter Esther. The weight of this injustice fell heaviest on them. They were the main victims here. How did they respond? A few days after the murder, Gladys Staines got up in front of the media and she said, "I have only one message for the people of India. I'm not bitter. Neither am I angry. But I have one great desire: that each citizen of this country should establish a personal relationship with Jesus Christ who gave his life for their sins...let us burn hatred and spread the flame of Christ's love." Her response was published throughout the country of India. People thought Mrs. Staines would leave India after the incident. She didn't. She continued her husband's work, and as a result the work expanded, and now there is a hospital there and it's called the Graham Staines Memorial hospital. See, that's a better story than Braveheart or John Wick. That's a Jesus story. That's our story.

© Rev. Peter

Jonker