

## “The Vengeance of Man or the Justice of God”

Genesis 4:17-26

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Epiphany Season

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Our sermon text today is Genesis 4:17-26. Listen now once more to God’s holy and inerrant word.

*8 Cain spoke to Abel his brother. And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him. 9 Then the LORD said to Cain, “Where is Abel your brother?” He said, “I do not know; am I my brother’s keeper?” 10 And the LORD said, “What have you done? The voice of your brother’s blood is crying to me from the ground. 11 And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother’s blood from your hand. 12 When you work the ground, it shall no longer yield to you its strength. You shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth.” 13 Cain said to the LORD, “My punishment is greater than I can bear. 14 Behold, you have driven me today away from the ground, and from your face I shall be hidden. I shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth, and whoever finds me will kill me.” 15 Then the LORD said to him, “Not so! If anyone kills Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold.” And the LORD put a mark on Cain, lest any who found him should attack him. 16 Then Cain went away from the presence of the Lord and settled in the land of Nod, east of Eden.*

*17 Cain knew his wife, and she conceived and bore Enoch. When he built a city, he called the name of the city after the name of his son, Enoch. 18 To Enoch was born Irad, and Irad fathered Mehujael, and Mehujael fathered Methushael, and Methushael fathered Lamech. 19 And Lamech took two wives. The name of the one was Adah, and the name of the other Zillah. 20 Adah bore Jabal; he was the father of those who dwell in tents and have livestock. 21 His brother’s name was Jubal; he was the father of all those who play the lyre and pipe. 22 Zillah also bore Tubalcain; he was the forger of all instruments of bronze and iron. The sister of Tubalcain was Naamah.*

23 *Lamech said to his wives:*

*“Adah and Zillah, hear my voice;  
you wives of Lamech, listen to what I say:  
I have killed a man for wounding me,  
a young man for striking me.  
24 If Cain’s revenge is sevenfold,  
then Lamech’s is seventy-sevenfold.”*

*25 And Adam knew his wife again, and she bore a son and called his name Seth, for she said, “God has appointed for me another offspring instead of Abel, for Cain killed him.” 26 To Seth also a son was born, and he called his name Enosh. At that time people began to call upon the name of the LORD.*

Thus far the reading of God’s word. It is absolutely true, and it is given to you because your Father in heaven loves you. Prayer...

One of the points on which the Scriptures are most insistent from beginning to end is that there are only two fundamental ways to live — the way of the righteousness or the way of the wickedness — the way of faith or the way of rebellion, the way of goodness or the way of evil.

Famously, Moses lays out for Israel before she enters the promised land both the blessing and the curse — the way of life or the way of death.

Psalm 1, the gateway of the Psalter, insists that its reader may either walk in the counsel of the wicked, stand in the way of sinners, sit in the seat of scoffers — or delight themselves in the Law of the LORD, which will make them like a fruitful tree rooted by streams of water.

And it concludes with this firm warning and promise about these two ways: *The LORD knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.*

The Proverbs follow a similar line of reasoning — Solomon instructs his son that he must choose between either wisdom or folly — and the way of wisdom will lead to honor and life and peace, while folly will lead to death and darkness.

The prophets are similarly insistent — the way of repentance and faith will result in blessing and prosperity, while continued wickedness will be met with the terrible judgment of God.

Jesus himself speaks in similar terms — in the sermon on the mount, he concludes by telling his disciples that they must either listen to his words and build their houses on the rock, or ignore his teaching and build their houses on the sand — which will lead to their destruction.

As modern people, this kind of strict bifurcation doesn't sit easily with us. It feels a little simplistic. I mean, isn't there some nuance?

Mightn't there be path in the middle — something less than righteousness that isn't really that evil, that doesn't actually lead to total destruction?

But we must be careful of trying to be wiser than God. From beginning to end, the Scriptures really do speak of human beings in this way.

And in our passage this morning, we get a dramatic picture of the effects of wickedness, the consequences of turning away from the path of the righteous, in this story of Cain and his descendants.

Cain, as we heard in the beginning of our passage this morning, has murdered his brother Abel, and been sentenced by God to a lifetime of wandering as a fugitive.

But instead of accepting God's judgment and repenting of his violence, Cain settles in the land of Nod, east of Eden — and there he builds a city.

In a very real sense, Cain's city is founded on Abel's murder. He could not live at peace with his brother, and so he killed him and founded a city - a city erected in defiance of God and his justice.

Now, one of the interesting things about the city that Cain builds is that it possesses real cultural achievements.

His descendants develop animal husbandry, and learn the art of breeding livestock and shepherding them from place to place.

They work with metal and forge instruments of bronze and iron — weapons of warfare, certainly, but likely also domestic tools, implements for farming and mining and carpentry.

And this city that Cain builds is not only interested in economic developments — they also build a kind of culture — his descendants make lyres and pipes and develop skill in music.

But still, this rottenness at the heart of Cain's city, this rottenness at the heart of all human civilizations that reject the way of God also develops and grows and turns into something monstrous.

Lamech, Cain's direct descendant, takes his forefather's action of violence and turns it into something perverse, something terrible.

He boasts:

*"I have killed a man for wounding me,  
A young man for striking me.  
If Cain's revenge is sevenfold,  
Then Lamech's is seventy-seven fold."*

God, remember, had placed his mark on Cain, protecting him from violent retribution, and swearing seven-fold vengeance on anyone who killed him.

But now, many years later, God's action of mercy has been corrupted (perhaps through Cain's own boasting) into a sign of Cain's powerful revenge instead of God's protection.

And Cain's descendant, Lamech, now crows about his own perverse power to protect himself.

If a man wounds him, Lamech will kill him.

If a young man (literally: a child) strikes Lamech, well Lamech will kill him, too.

In fact, if Cain's revenge was sevenfold, then Lamech's will be seventy-seven fold.

In contrast to the way of the wicked, the way of the righteous is described briefly in verses 25 and 26.

The way of the righteous is not outwardly impressive, and I think that difference is worth reflecting on as we consider these two paths - the path of the wicked and the path of the righteous in this passage.

There's no mention of Seth and his descendants building a city.

No cultural achievements are highlighted here.

No one is boasting about their power to defend themselves.

Just a simple summary:

*25 And Adam knew his wife again, and she bore a son and called his name Seth, for she said, "God has appointed for me another offspring instead of Abel, for Cain killed him." 26 To Seth also a son was born, and he called his name Enosh. At that time people began to call upon the name of the LORD.*

One of the most significant points of contrast between the line of Cain and the line of Seth in this passage is how they respond to being mistreated, and I want to linger on that dissimilarity for a bit this morning.

Cain's city, of course, as we have already noted, is based upon the logic of violence and revenge.

Lamech, to ensure that no one threatens him, promises that he will destroy anyone who even so much as strikes him.

Adam and Eve endure the murder of their son. It is terrible horror.

But there is no indication that they seek any revenge against Cain. He goes off, under God's protection, and founds his city.

And then Seth grows up, obviously hearing the story of his brother's murder. But instead of seeking to put Cain to death, he marries, fathers a son, and begins to lead the people in calling upon the name of the LORD.

Beloved, these are two fundamentally different ways to live, and they are a crucial distinction between walking in the way of the righteous as opposed to the way of the wicked.

All of us, and I mean all of us — will be mistreated and sinned against in this world, sometimes in the most horrible of ways.

Our parents will sin against us.

Our siblings will sin against us.

Our friends. Our spouse. Our co-workers. Our boss. Fellow church members. Our neighbors.

There will be sins of omission committed against us, as people fall short of the requirements of righteousness and love in how they treat us.

There will be sins of commission committed against us, as people maliciously harm us by their actions and their words.

We will be slandered against. We will be betrayed. We might even experience violence against ourselves or those whom we love.

This will happen, beloved. All of us bear the scars being sinned against.

The question is? How will we respond when others sin against us, when others harm us?

Most of us, probably, will not be tempted by the extreme path of Lamech — to boastfully threaten outright violence and seventy-seven fold vengeance against those who harm us.

But the logic of vengeance is subtle. And our Lord Jesus warned us not only against physical violence, but also against the violence hidden in our hearts.

How many of us, sinned against severely enough by a person we've trusted, might be tempted to say in our hearts — "They're dead to me" or "I'm done with them" or "I'm writing him off."

That kind of language is symbolic, but the symbols matter. Because it is not only our actions, but also our words and thoughts that are significant.

It is quite possible to avoid outward violence and vengeance, while inwardly burning people to the ground.

The point is this, beloved.

Bitterness and hatred and anger and holding a grudge are also forms of vengeance against those who have sinned against us.

And if there's anything that the Bible makes clear, it is that vengeance is prohibited for those who would walk the way of the righteous.

Leviticus prohibits both outward and inward vengeance explicitly, as we heard already this morning.

The Law of God instructs us: *"You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD."*

Notice that God's law excludes both the outward action of vengeance, as well as the inward stewarding of vengeance in the heart by bearing a grudge — and that instead of vengeance, loving your neighbor as yourself is commanded — and in this context, the neighbor you are commanded to love in this way is the one who has sinned against you.

Proverbs adds its wisdom, commanding us with these words: *"Do not say, 'I will repay'; wait for the LORD, and he will deliver you."*

Again, notice that Proverbs is not only prohibiting explicit vengeance, but even the holding of bitterness in the heart — even saying to yourself "I will repay that person for what they've done to me" is excluded.

The New Testament, of course, builds on the teaching of the God's law.

The Apostle Paul instructs his readers: *"Repay no one evil for evil..."*

Paul doesn't mince words here. He assumes that evil will be committed against us. And yet, he tells us that we may not repay evil for evil.



And remember, Paul is writing to men and women who have experienced violent persecution, men and women who have lost homes and livelihoods and even loved ones to their enemies.

And yet Paul insists: *“Repay no one evil for evil...If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink.”*

Paul, of course, is only building on the teaching of Jesus. For it was Jesus who taught his disciples, saying: *“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven.”*

But how do we do this? I mean, that’s the question, right?

How can we possibly be endure evil and not take vengeance, how can we be sinned against and not be embittered, not bear a grudge?

I think the Scriptures teach us a few things about this.

First, we must not lose sight of the horror of the way of vengeance.

At least one of the problems with living in the way of bitterness and hatred and violence is that these things build on themselves.

Bitterness begets bitterness. Hatred begets hatred. Violence begets violence.

It is a cycle that ends only in destruction — the way of Cain and Lamach is the way of foolishness. For the way of vengeance only sharpens enmity and hatred.

Remember, it is only a few short paragraphs between the boasting of Lamach at the end of Genesis 4 regarding his vengeance, and the statement of the Lord at the beginning of Genesis 6, where he found that the earth was filled with violence.

When we repay evil for evil, we end up destroying not only those we hate, but ourselves and our children as well.

But it is not only the horror of vengeance that should keep us from that fruitless path.

It is also the reality that we ourselves, in our sin, have been loved by God, that God has graciously forgiven our sins and our evil against him.

In Romans 12, Paul addresses his readers and says: "*Beloved, never avenge yourselves,*" and I think that "*Beloved*" is important.

We will forswear vengeance against our enemies only as much as we comprehend our own sin against God, the wickedness and evil of our own hearts — that, as Paul says elsewhere in Romans — it was when we were God's enemies that he reconciled us to himself by the death of his Son.

To put it more bluntly, Paul says, "*Beloved, never avenge yourselves,*" because it is only the knowledge of our belovedness in Christ that will produce our capacity to love our neighbor by not taking vengeance or bearing a grudge against him.

As we close this morning, I would simply remind you, beloved, that there are only two fundamental ways to live.

One is summed up by Lamech in our text this morning:

*"I have killed a man for wounding me,  
a young man for striking me.  
If Cain's revenge is sevenfold,  
then Lamech's is seventy-sevenfold."*

And the other is described by Paul in his letter to the Ephesians:

*"Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you."*

One of these paths is the way of folly. The other is the way of wisdom.

One of these paths will lead to death. The other will lead to life.

And it is one or the other. There is no middle path.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.