

St. Thomas Aquinas

The Summa Theologica

(Benziger Bros. edition, 1947)

Translated by

Fathers of the English Dominican Province

[Index](#) [[<<](#) [↻](#) [>>](#)]

[Second Part of the Second Part](#) [[<<](#) [>>](#)]

[Question: 108](#) [[<<](#) [>>](#)]

OF VENGEANCE (FOUR ARTICLES)

We must now consider vengeance, under which head there are four points of inquiry:

- [\(1\)](#) Whether vengeance is lawful?
 - [\(2\)](#) Whether it is a special virtue?
 - [\(3\)](#) Of the manner of taking vengeance;
 - [\(4\)](#) On whom should vengeance be taken?
-

[Index](#) [[<<](#) [↻](#) [>>](#)]

[Second Part of the Second Part](#) [[<<](#) [>>](#)]

[Question: 108](#) [[<<](#) [>>](#)]

[Article: 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 ([Dt. 32:35](#), [Rm. 12:19](#)): "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 (Contra

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 [*Cf. Opus Imperfectum, Hom. v in Matth., falsely ascribed to St. 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 (Ecclus. 26:5-7): "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 Mt. 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 ([Lk. 18:7](#)): "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 ([Rm. 12:21](#)): "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 ([Rm. 13:4](#)) 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 [*Cf. Opus Imperfectum, Hom. v in Matth., falsely ascribed to St. 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

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 (4 Kgs. 1); likewise Eliseus cursed the boys that mocked him (4 Kgs. 2); and Pope Sylverius excommunicated those who sent him into exile (XXIII, Q. iv, Cap. Guilisarius). 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 (De Serm. Dom. in Monte i).

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 (Ex. 14), and the people of Sodom were entirely destroyed (Gn. 19)---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 (Num 25) 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.

[Index](#) [[<<](#) | [>>](#)]

[Second Part of the Second Part](#) [[<<](#) | [>>](#)]

[Question: 108](#) [[<<](#) | [>>](#)]

Article: 2 [[<<](#) | [>>](#)]

Whether vengeance is a special virtue?

Objection 1: It seems that vengeance is not a special and distinct virtue. For just as the good are rewarded for their good deeds, so are the wicked punished for their evil deeds. Now the rewarding of the good does not belong to a special virtue, but is an act of commutative justice. Therefore in the same way vengeance should not be accounted a special virtue.

Objection 2: Further, there is no need to appoint a special virtue for an act to which a man is sufficiently disposed by the other virtues. Now man is sufficiently disposed by the virtues of fortitude or zeal to avenge evil. Therefore vengeance should not be reckoned a special virtue.

On the contrary, Tully (De Invent. Rhet. ii) reckons it a part of justice.

I answer that, As the Philosopher states (Ethic. ii, 1), aptitude to virtue is in us by nature, but the complement of virtue is in us through habituation or some other cause. Hence it is evident that virtues perfect us so that we follow in due manner our natural inclinations, which belong to the natural right. Wherefore to every definite natural inclination there corresponds a special virtue. Now there is a special inclination of nature to remove harm, for which reason animals have the irascible power distinct from the concupiscible. Man resists harm by defending himself against wrongs, lest they be inflicted on him, or he avenges those which have already been inflicted on him, with the intention, not of harming, but of removing the harm done. And this belongs to vengeance, for Tully says (De Invent. Rhet. ii) that by "vengeance we resist force, or wrong, and in general whatever is obscure" ["Obscurum" Cicero wrote 'obfuturum' but the sense is the same as St. Thomas gives in the parenthesis] "(i.e. derogatory), either by self-defense or by avenging it." Therefore vengeance is a special virtue.

Reply to Objection 1: Just as repayment of a legal debt belongs to commutative justice, and as repayment of a moral debt, arising from the bestowal of a particular favor, belongs to the virtue of gratitude, so too the punishment of sins, so far as it is the concern of public justice, is an act of commutative justice; while so far as it is concerned in defending the rights of the individual by whom a wrong is resisted, it belongs to the virtue of revenge.

Reply to Objection 2: Fortitude disposes to vengeance by removing an obstacle thereto, namely, fear of an imminent danger. Zeal, as denoting the fervor of love, signifies the primary root of vengeance, in so far as a man avenges the wrong done to God and his neighbor, because charity makes him regard them as his own. Now every act of virtue proceeds from charity as its root, since, according to Gregory (Hom. xxvii in Ev.), "there are no green leaves on the bough of good works, unless charity be the root."

Reply to Objection 3: Two vices are opposed to vengeance: one by way of excess, namely, the sin of cruelty or brutality, which exceeds the measure in punishing; while the other is a vice by way of deficiency and consists in being remiss in punishing, wherefore it is written ([Prov. 13:24](#)): "He that spareth the rod hateth his son." But the virtue of vengeance consists in observing the due measure of vengeance with regard to all the circumstances.

[Index](#) [[<<](#) [>>](#) | [>>](#)]

[Second Part of the Second Part](#) [[<<](#) | [>>](#)]

[Question: 108](#) [[<<](#) | [>>](#)]

Article: 3 [[<<](#) | [>>](#)]

Whether vengeance should be wrought by means of punishments customary among men?

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 ([Mt.](#)

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 ([FS](#), [Question \[105\]](#), [Article \[2\]](#)).

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 (*De Civ. Dei* xxi), "Tully writes that the laws recognize eight kinds of punishment": namely, "death," whereby man is deprived of life; "stripes," "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 averse to sin: because the fear of punishment is greater than the enticement of the example of sin.

[Index](#) [[<<](#) | [>>](#)]

[Second Part of the Second Part](#) [[<<](#) | [>>](#)]

[Question: 108](#) [[<<](#) | [>>](#)]

Article: 4 [[<<](#) | [>>](#)]

Whether vengeance should be taken on those who have sinned involuntarily?

Objection 1: It seems that vengeance should be taken on those who have sinned involuntarily. For the will of one man does not follow from the will of another. Yet one man is punished for another, according to Ex. 20:5, "I am... God... jealous, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, unto the third and fourth generation." Thus for the sin of Cham, his son Chanaan was curse ([Gn. 9:25](#)) and for the sin of Giezi, his descendants were struck with leprosy ([4 Kgs. 5](#)). Again the blood of Christ lays the descendants of the Jews under the ban of punishment, for they said ([Mt. 27:25](#)): "His blood be upon us and upon our children." Moreover we read (Josue 7) that the people of Israel were delivered into the hands of their enemies for the sin of Achan, and that the same people were overthrown by the Philistines on account of the sin of the sons of Heli ([1 Kgs. 4](#)). Therefore a person is to be punished without having deserved it voluntarily.

Objection 2: Further, nothing is voluntary except what is in a man's power. But sometimes a man is punished for what is not in his power; thus a man is removed from the administration of the Church on account of being infected with leprosy; and a Church ceases to be an episcopal see on account of the depravity or evil of the people. Therefore vengeance is taken not only for voluntary sins.

Objection 3: Further, ignorance makes an act involuntary. Now vengeance is sometimes taken on the ignorant. Thus the children of the people of Sodom, though they were in invincible ignorance, perished with their parents ([Gn. 19](#)). Again, for the sin of Dathan and Abiron their children were swallowed up together with them (Num 16). Moreover, dumb animals, which are devoid of reason, were commanded to be slain on account of the sin of the Amalekites ([1 Kgs. 15](#)). Therefore vengeance is sometimes taken on those who have deserved it involuntarily.

Objection 4: Further, compulsion is most opposed to voluntariness. But a man does not escape the debt of punishment through being compelled by fear to commit a sin. Therefore vengeance is sometimes taken on those who have deserved it involuntarily.

Objection 5: Further Ambrose says on Lk. 5 that "the ship in which Judas was, was in distress"; wherefore "Peter, who was calm in the security of his own merits, was in distress about those of others." But Peter did not will the sin of Judas. Therefore a person is sometimes punished without having voluntarily deserved it.

On the contrary, Punishment is due to sin. But every sin is voluntary according to Augustine (De Lib. Arb. iii; Retract. i). Therefore vengeance should be taken only on those who have deserved it voluntarily.

I answer that, Punishment may be considered in two ways. First, under the aspect of punishment, and in this way punishment is not due save for sin, because by means of punishment the equality of justice is restored, in so far as he who by sinning has exceeded in following his own will suffers something that is contrary to this will. Wherefore, since every sin is voluntary, not excluding original sin, as stated above ([FS, Question \[81\], Article \[1\]](#)), it follows that no one is punished in this way, except for something done voluntarily. Secondly, punishment may be considered as a medicine, not only healing the past sin, but also preserving from future sin, or conducing to some good, and in this way a person is sometimes punished without any fault of his own, yet not without cause.

It must, however, be observed that a medicine never removes a greater good in order to promote a lesser; thus the medicine of the body never blinds the eye, in order to repair the heel: yet sometimes it is harmful in lesser things that it may be helpful in things of greater

[Donate bitcoin](#). St. Isidore [e-book library/forum](#) » [aquinas](#) » [english](#) » [summa](#) » [SS](#) » [SS108.html](#)ds are least important, sometimes a person is punished in his temporal goods without any fault of his own. Such are many of the punishments inflicted by God in this present life for our humiliation or probation. But no one is punished in spiritual goods without any fault on his part, neither in this nor in the future life, because in the latter punishment is not medicinal, but a result of spiritual condemnation.

Reply to Objection 1: A man is never condemned to a spiritual punishment for another man's sin, because spiritual punishment affects the soul, in respect of which each man is master of himself. But sometimes a man is condemned to punishment in temporal matters for the sin of another, and this for three reasons. First, because one man may be the temporal goods of another, and so he may be punished in punishment of the latter: thus children, as to the body, are a belonging of their father, and slaves are a possession of their master. Secondly, when one person's sin is transmitted to another, either by "imitation," as children copy the sins of their parents, and slaves the sins of their masters, so as to sin with greater daring; or by way of "merit," as the sinful subjects merit a sinful superior, according to Job 34:30, "Who maketh a man that is a hypocrite to reign for the sins of the people?" Hence the people of Israel were punished for David's sin in numbering the people ([2 Kgs. 24](#)). This may also happen through some kind of "consent" or "connivance": thus sometimes even the good are punished in temporal matters together with the wicked, for not having condemned their sins, as Augustine says (*De Civ. Dei* i, 9). Thirdly, in order to mark the unity of human fellowship, whereby one man is bound to be solicitous for another, lest he sin; and in order to inculcate horror of sin, seeing that the punishment of one affects all, as though all were one body, as Augustine says in speaking of the sin of Achan (*Questions. sup. Josue viii*). The saying of the Lord, "Visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation," seems to belong to mercy rather than to severity, since He does not take vengeance forthwith, but waits for some future time, in order that the descendants at least may mend their ways; yet should the wickedness of the descendants increase, it becomes almost necessary to take vengeance on them.

Reply to Objection 2: As Augustine states (*Questions. sup. Josue viii*), human judgment should conform to the divine judgment, when this is manifest, and God condemns men spiritually for their own sins. But human judgment cannot be conformed to God's hidden judgments, whereby He punishes certain persons in temporal matters without any fault of theirs, since man is unable to grasp the reasons of these judgments so as to know what is expedient for each individual. Wherefore according to human judgment a man should never be condemned without fault of his own to an inflictive punishment, such as death, mutilation or flogging. But a man may be condemned, even according to human judgment, to a punishment of forfeiture, even without any fault on his part, but not without cause: and this in three ways.

First, through a person becoming, without any fault of his, disqualified for having or acquiring a certain good: thus for being infected with leprosy a man is removed from the administration of the Church: and for bigamy, or through pronouncing a death sentence a man is hindered from receiving sacred orders.

Secondly, because the particular good that he forfeits is not his own but common property: thus that an episcopal see be attached to a certain church belongs to the good of the whole city, and not only to the good of the clerics.

Thirdly, because the good of one person may depend on the good of another: thus in the crime of high treason a son loses his inheritance through the sin of his parent.

[Donate bitcoin.](#) St. Isidore [e-book library/forum](#) » [aquinas](#) » [english](#) » [summa](#) » [SS](#) » [SS108.html](#)
together with their parents, both because they are a possession of their parents, so that their parents are punished also in their person, and because this is for their good lest, should they be spared, they might imitate the sins of their parents, and thus deserve to be punished still more severely. Vengeance is wrought on dumb animals and any other irrational creatures, because in this way their owners are punished; and also in horror of sin.

Reply to Objection 4: An act done through compulsion of fear is not involuntary simply, but has an admixture of voluntariness, as stated above ([FS](#), [Question \[6\]](#), [Articles \[5\]](#),6).

Reply to Objection 5: The other apostles were distressed about the sin of Judas, in the same way as the multitude is punished for the sin of one, in commendation of unity, as state above (Reply Objection [1],2).