



However skillful his spells.  
God, break the teeth in their mouths,  
Snap off the fangs of these young lions, Yahweh.  
May they drain away like water running to waste,  
May they wither like trampled grass,  
Like the slug that melts as it moves  
Or a still-born child that never sees the sun.  
Before they sprout thorns like the bramble,  
Green or burnt up, may retribution whirl them away.  
The upright will rejoice to see vengeance done,  
And will bathe his feet in the blood of the wicked.  
'So,' people will say, 'the upright does have a reward;  
there is a God to dispense justice on earth.'

### **Sermon**

Turn the other cheek.  
The quality of mercy is not strained.  
That's very nice.  
An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.  
Bathing their feet in the blood of the unjust  
That's not so nice.

On September the 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 four airplanes were hijacked and pointed towards the two towers of the World Trade Center, the Pentagon and the White House. Three of the planes reached their targets with catastrophic results. One plane's passengers wrestled control away from the hijackers and unfortunately crashed.

September the 11<sup>th</sup> and the subsequent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq are too big for me. I can't imagine a world where minds exist that can decide hijacking a passenger plane and crashing it into the side of a building full of people is a good idea. I don't understand the justifications for the war against the Taliban in Afghanistan and the government of Sadaam Hussein in Iraq. How can you ask me to think about these things. These things are not my responsibility. I'm neither priest, prophet nor king. This is not my problem.

Where is the God that dispenses justice? I want to see some vengeance. Let's have some upright verdicts. Let's see some teeth breaking and wrath from on high. Psalm 58 is in the Bible too. Let's see a little old testament action.

Jesus is not helping me out here either. Turn the other cheek. Go the extra mile. Give them your cloak too. That's about the dumbest advice I've ever heard. Words to live by if you're a professional doormat. Nobody does that. It's ridiculous.

Now what are we to do. I'm trying to deal with earth shaking events and Jesus is making no sense whatsoever. Yahweh of the Old Testament is shrieking for a righteous smackdown.

Now is the time to turn to holy mother church for answers. It's her job, after all, to think about this stuff. They're the experts. Holy Mother church has some very simple guidelines for people to follow. They're simple. They're clear and they're practical.

Here they are,

pray, pay and obey.

Now that's more like it. I understand that.

Can you argue with that? Well, probably you could but work with me here. I'm building up to a point.

Prayer certainly can't hurt. What could be wrong with prayer? Asking for God's help is always the right answer. Isn't it?

Pay, now that's more difficult but at least I understand it. The church helps me, I help the church. I get that.

Obedience is even more simple. Trust my years of experience as a professional Roman Catholic. If the abbot or the bishop gives me an order and I do it then my work is done. It really doesn't matter what the order is. As long as I'm obedient it's God and the bishop who have to work out the details. I'm just following orders. The reason for the orders are not my responsibility and my conscience is clear. The freedom of obedience is great.

So I don't have to understand what happened and why we're doing what we're doing. If the general says shoot, I shoot. If the president says we're winning then we're winning. If the bishop says we're doing the right thing then we're doing the right thing. More praying, more paying, more obeying will make everything alright.

I personally haven't believed any of that since I was 12 but when you're in crisis it's an old port in the storm. Rational decisions are simply too much to ask when things are falling apart all around me. I really, really want somebody to tell me what to do.

Well, in the words of the immortal Cher, "Snap out of it." As long as things are too big and too complex and overwhelming, you are not going to be able to do anything for yourself. You really are stuck in pay, pray and obey. Don't get stuck there. Take a deep breathe and decide things are not too big, too complex or overwhelming.

Are you tuning out on me? I'm serious.

You have the only vote on whether or not this is a crisis for you. If it's a crisis then you're going to have to get some help and you're going to have to trust them to tell you what to do and hope for the best. Get some help. If only we'd done that after September

the 11<sup>th</sup>. We really needed help. The whole world stepped up to do what they could and nothing happened. We decided to go it alone. Instead of recognizing a crisis and getting the help we needed, the government our nation elected decided to pretend this wasn't a crisis and hang tough.

See, I'm telling you, pray, pay and obey is not always the wrong answer. It's just not the only answer. Sometimes a crisis really hits and sometimes you really need help. Pretending it's not a crisis is not the help you need. Don't just stand there. Scream! Send up a flair. Don't rearrange those deck chairs. It's time to call in the cavalry.

Take a deep breathe. OK. Let it out. Are we having a crisis or not? Pray, pay and obey is not the answer this time. You can handle this. What's the first thing that needs to be done? If you make it past "scream for help," this is not an overwhelming crisis. One of the little quirks in our culture that I've recently noticed is that the next option after "scream for help" is "knock his block off." I really like knocking blocks off. After years of pray, pay and obey it's really satisfying to knock a few blocks. Unfortunately that's the crisis talking and not you. You still haven't taken that deep breathe and made a real decision. "Knock his block off" is just "scream for help" for the macho among us.

Is this making sense? Here's the same thing in acting terms for the drama queens among us. I need to know your motivation, darling. Will knocking off said block work? Big scary monster, red in tooth and claw? Knock away. All others require further processing.

And finally we just about made it back to turn the other cheek. I warned you I liked the scenic route.

Turning the other cheek and the quality of mercy are not about what you do. They're about why you do what you do.

When something happens to me, whether it's a bad thing or a good thing, I get to make the next move. Maybe I need to get out of Dodge or get a doctor to take a look at that or send an e-mail and give everybody the good news.

If I'm praying, paying and obeying it's because I don't have any other choices. That's my why, that's my motivation.

In St. Matthew's gospel and in Shakespeare's play we getting examples of other motivations. Don't turn the other cheek because you're a doormat. Turn the other cheek and defy them to hit you again. Turn the other cheek and show them you're not afraid. Turn the other cheek because there are worse things than smacked cheeks. The gospels don't give us a list of possible motivations, just their outcomes. It's up to you to find the one that fits.

Portia is just about to give Shylock exactly what he wants in exactly the way the law provides. She's taking this moment, however, to try to convince him to ignore the law

and do a good thing, do the right thing. Shylock will have none of it and demands his pound of flesh. In the end the merchant is saved by a technicality and Shylock is punished to the full extent of the anti-Semitism in Shakespeare's fictional Venice.

And now, here we are, back at September the 11<sup>th</sup>. We're starting in a new place after we got the wind knocked out of us. We happy few are still soldiering on and trying to make sense out of it all. New jobs are just getting into gear. Everyone's busy. Deadlines are piling up and that last nerve is being jangled even as we speak. What are we doing? I'm trying to say that there's a more important question. Why are we doing?

Here's my parting shot.. There are a whole list of imprecatory psalms that we can use to damn our enemies. Psalm 58 is actually kinda mild as far as ancient Hebrew curses go. If you want justification for slaughtering a few innocents and starting wars for a righteous cause I can give you verses to use. Some of them are even in the New Testament. That's after the Prince of Peace straightened all this out for us. Jesus is enigmatic at best and impractical at least. Even Shakespeare goes from the quality of mercy to converting Shylock to Christianity at the edge of a sword. God is not letting us off the hook by leading us by the nose. These are our decisions. We can either be locked in crisis or search for a motivation that leads to a choice and then make a good one. I'm convinced that's the best we can do. It's one more pathway into the presence of the divine.