

JUSTICE ON THE RIGHT TERMS A Devotional Meditation on Emor (Say)

Leviticus 21:1-24:23; Ezekiel 33:10-11, 44:15-31; Matthew 5:38-42; Luke 6:27-38

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Robert Earl Jones (L) as Luther Coleman and Robert Redford (R) as Johnny Hooker in *The Sting*, winner of the Oscar for Best Picture of 1973. [Imaged by Heritage Auctions, HA.com.](https://www.heritage.com/auctions/ha.com)

We all like to see the good guys come out on top. That's one reason *The Sting* won seven Oscars in 1974, including Best Picture. The movie follows Johnny Hooker, a petty thief, in his quest for revenge against Doyle Lonnegan, a crime boss who has ordered the murder of Johnny's friend and partner, Luther Coleman. Johnny and Luther robbed the wrong man one night in Joliet, Illinois: a courier carrying gambling receipts for Lonnegan's organization. Lonnegan's revenge compelled Johnny to seek out Henry Gondorff, a master con artist, and with his help they outwit Lonnegan and steal a fortune from him, as well as elude the police and the FBI, and cover their tracks so Lonnegan will never come after them again.

The satisfying element of this story is in the victory of the weak and powerless against the strong and mighty. We could say it is a victory of good over evil, but then we have to think about that for a moment. Johnny Hooker lost his friend because they were engaged in crime. Were they evil as well? Do we blame them, or do we blame the poverty of the Great Depression? Would Johnny and Luther have been good, law-abiding citizens if circumstances had endowed them with rewarding jobs? Or were their hearts genuinely evil – evil to the point that even jobs with substantial salaries would not have satisfied their greedy desires for more?

We do not have to confront those questions in *The Sting*. All we know is that a terrible injustice has been done – a crime out of proportion to the wrong originally done. Lonnegan's courier was carrying ill-gotten gains extorted from ordinary, honest people, so it was only right that Johnny and Luther relieve him of the loot. How dare that evil baron, Lonnegan, deprive those men of what rightfully belonged to the people we deem to be good! How much worse that his definition of righting the wrong involved inflicting an even greater wrong by committing murder.

But it doesn't stop there. We get so wrapped up in the story that we fail to realize the truth: Johnny Hooker never once tried to proceed righteously. Instead, he purposefully set out to beat Lonnegan at his own game, and through crime defeat crime. Yes, he won, but what further scars did he inflict on himself and others in the process? And did his sting operation sow the seeds of yet more evil, perpetuating an endless cycle of eye for eye, tooth for tooth, blood for blood?

It is true that God Himself specified such sentences for wrongdoing, as we read in Leviticus 24 –

Whoever mortally strikes down any man must surely be put to death. Whoever mortally strikes down an animal is to make restitution—life for life. If anyone injures his neighbor, as he has done, the same is to be done to him: fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth. Just as he has injured someone, so it should it be done to him. (Leviticus 24:17-20 TLV)

The question we must ask is whether these punishments are arbitrary. To answer that, we must understand the context. When the Lord gave the Torah to Moses, He intended that laws such as these be carried out under due process, with appropriate investigation by duly constituted authorities. The penalties listed are the maximums, not the prescribed punishment for every offense, regardless of circumstance. Moreover, these laws do not grant permission for vigilante justice. Ordinary citizens in ancient Israel could no more set themselves up as judge, jury, and executioner than ordinary citizens in any country today. Thus, the justice Johnny Hooker sought was not the justice of the Supreme Judge, but of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.

We understand the context when we read what our Messiah had to say about God's system of justice. In the Sermon on the Mount, Yeshua taught:

You have heard that it was said, "An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth." But I tell you, do not resist an evildoer. But whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn to him also the other. And the one wanting to sue you and to take your shirt, let him also have your coat. Whoever forces you to go one mile, go with him two. Give to the one who asks of you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.

Matthew 5:38-42 TLV

Luke's version of the sermon goes even further:

Do to others as you would have them do to you. If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who are doing good to you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners do this. And if you lend to those from whom you expect to take, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners in order to receive back the same. But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Then your reward will be great and you will be sons of *Elyon* [the Most High], for He is kind to the ungrateful and evil ones. Be compassionate, just as your Father is compassionate to you. Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Pardon, and you will be pardoned. Give, and it will be given to you—a good measure, pressed down, shaken together, overflowing, will be given into your lap. For whatever measure you measure out will be measured back to you.

Luke 6:31-38 TLV

There is no vigilante justice in these instructions. Instead, there is an exhortation to seek the best in every situation in hope that our adversaries will somehow be persuaded to turn from their hurtful ways. Then again, it may be that we ourselves are the ones who

need to turn from ways that harm others – especially if we are unaware of the harm we inflict. In any case, justice and vengeance belong to God alone, and He dispenses them through the authorities He has designated for that purpose.

But if the authorities themselves are unjust, what are we to do? Well, this is where faith comes in – faith that our holy and righteous Judge will take care of the problem in His time and in His way. And this is where we must remember two important points. First, we must know that He is a *redeeming God*. He does not want to see the death of the wicked, but desires their repentance and redemption. If He were to pursue justice on our terms, would that perhaps circumvent the redemptive process for someone else? Would we, in our desire for revenge, close the door on another human being's chance to enter the Kingdom of Heaven?

And the second point? Well, that comes from something Yeshua said in the context of doing to others as we would have them do to us: "He is kind to the ungrateful and evil ones." Who are the ungrateful and evil ones? Are they only those who commit robbery and murder and extortion and all manner of violence? Or are they also those who harbor secret thoughts of such things, and who, if circumstances turn out to be just so, might actually act on them?

Come to think of it, all of us have been ungrateful and evil at some point, and probably remain so in certain areas of our lives. So then, if our Judge is kind to us, how can we do otherwise? Do we want Him to avenge us and bring justice? Then let us not give others cause to cry out for His justice to be done against us.