

## Trinity 22

*“But that servant went out and found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii; and he laid hands on him and took him by the throat, saying, ‘Pay me what you owe!’”*

What is it that you are owed? Respect? Love? Obedience? Wages? To be left alone? Maybe you're too unassuming to think of anything in this category. Think again. Instead of thinking of what you are owed, think about what upsets you. Whatever makes you feel slighted does so because you are not paid what's owed you. And your thinking may be quite right. After all, the commandments are clear. Begin with, *“Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”* And what is owed you is made more specific in the 10 commands. Honor towards fathers and mothers and all in authority. Respect for your life and your bodily welfare. Love, honor and affection from your spouse. Respect for your property and fair trade. Speaking the truth to you and about you. All these are legitimate expectations and when they don't happen to you, you are being robbed because you are not getting what is rightly yours. Those who are neglecting to do these things for you are being wicked and lazy. They are disobeying God and hurting you in the process. In fact, they are thieves. Just as he is a thief who does not pay you what he owes. But, of course it cuts both ways. Just as that person is a thief, So also you are a thief, and a wicked, lazy person when you do not give to your neighbor what you owe according to the law. But, of course, you can always rationalize. After all, do you still owe these things to someone who has first robbed you of the same? Maybe it's not really stealing but simply taking what is your own. Garnished wages. If you are disrespected you can disrespect them back. Right? If someone says words that hurt you, you are entitled to hurt them back. In short, if people aren't paying you what they owe, you will get it by force. It all makes perfect, rational sense and you can feel completely justified in doing it. But there are significant problems with this way of thinking. These problems are **practical, legal and theological**. First, there is the practical problem of who started it? If you withhold love from your neighbor because she withheld it from you... What if she was already responding to something that you did first? And now, your behavior ups the ante and the conflict spirals up. This can go on forever and ever. It escalates with each round and the hurts become more and more painful until the aggregate debt is insurmountable. Friendships are broken. Wars are started. Families are torn apart. All because you demand what you are owed. That is a practical problem. There is also a legal problem: you are forbidden to take the law into your own hands. People who burst into hotel rooms to take back their own property are put on trial. Those who hang horse thieves or shoot muggers in the back are outlaw vigilantes. So also in God's law. Nowhere does Scripture tie your behavior to your neighbor's. Jesus nowhere excuses you from loving your neighbor and doing kind things to him just because he has failed to love you. No matter how much your neighbor owes you, withholding love is still stealing.

You cannot take the law into your own hands. In fact, since Jesus teaches that what you do to your neighbor, is actually done to Him, such vigilante behavior actually robs Jesus Himself of His due! When you think and act in this way, you are in fact, confronting Christ Himself and saying, “until you pay me what you owe, I will neither, love, honor or obey you!” And that brings us to the theological problem: There is a good reason that God does not include any disclaimers in the ten commandments: Rather Jesus says, *“Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”* The law is not given as a bill of rights — what you are owed by your neighbor. They are rather, first and foremost, a description of the way that God is toward you. They are a description of Jesus Christ and his life of love toward you. And that is why they contain no disclaimer clauses. For Jesus does not apply disclaimers to you. He does not withhold His respect and honor from you even though you first withhold from Him. He does not withdraw His love and affection from you even when you do from Him. He doesn't abandon you even though you hung Him out to dry on the cross. He doesn't neglect your bodily needs even though you covered His body with stripes. He doesn't rob you of your livelihood even though you have first stripped Him of His garments and left Him naked and without any earthly possessions. He doesn't take away your most precious name of “Christian” even though you have made Him the world's worst sinner before His Father in heaven. Christ is the forgiving King who cancels your every debt which you have accumulated though hundreds and thousands of illegitimate withholdings of respect, honor, love, affection, bodily, financial and emotional support. All these debts Christ has assumed for Himself and paid their price on your behalf. For no debt can go unpaid. That much is true. Whether it is paid by the one who accrued it or the One who forgave it, it will be paid. And your debt has been paid by the One who forgives. It is no more. Jesus was crucified to set you free from your debt of sin. Therefore, you have been freed from seeing the commandments as a “bill of rights.” Instead, you are given to see them for what they are: a picture of Christ. This is what St. Paul meant when he wrote, *“we know that the law is good , if a man use it lawfully”* 1 Tim. 1:8 When you think about the Law, do not even let it enter your mind how this applies to your neighbor's treatment of you. Because your neighbor, like you, always fails! It leads to the magnification of your neighbor's sins against you. It leads to your own growing feeling that you are missing out. It leads only to discontentedness, sadness, anger, bitterness and hate. But when you think of the Law it has only two legitimate directions. First, as a diagnosis of your own debt that you owe to your neighbor and to God. Then when it has called you to account, the Gospel transforms it into a living picture of your forgiving Lord who sees to your every need. And with this new vision, the privations which you experience at the hand of your neighbor are more than repaid by your Lord who died that you might live. When you thus keep your eyes focused on Jesus, it leads to a magnification of your own sins and the minimizing of your neighbor's. It leads to a growing knowledge that you have all that you need in Christ. It leads to contentedness, joy, love, peace, patience and kindness. In short, Christ.