

Wrath

Sixth in a series on vices and virtues.

Sermon by Dr. Jim Gilchrist

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Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil (Ephesians 4:26-27).

Here are three news stories from the last couple weeks. In Memphis, Tennessee, a mother was upset about a spitting contest between her son and another child, so she drank 40 ounces of malt liquor, grabbed a sword, and went running through her son's elementary school threatening the other child's mother. At the University of Alabama in Huntsville, a Harvard Ph.D. biologist failed to get tenure, so she shot six of her fellow faculty members, killing several of them. In Austin, Texas, a software engineer was upset about tax problems and mad about government in general, so he set his own house on fire, then flew a Piper Cherokee into a building that housed the local IRS offices, killing himself and injuring a number of others.

I didn't have to look very hard to find those stories. They just showed up in the paper or on the Internet. What they have in common is rage, a kind of anger run wild. They're all examples of wrath, another one of the Seven Deadly Sins.

Wrath can be deadly for two reasons: in the short run it can cause people to kill somebody; and in the long run, like the other deadly sins, it can consume and kill the soul that harbors it.

Of course, killing people is only the most extreme form of wrath. Road rage, domestic violence, and child abuse are more common examples, not to mention the low-grade smoldering anger and resentment that poison so many of our relationships.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus warns against wrath. It's so dangerous, he says, that it's on a continuum with murder. "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not murder,' but I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment." The Greek word translated "anger" is *orge*, as in our word "orgy." It means a passion that's out of control. Jesus says that actions like murder grow out of seeds planted in the heart, and it's the heart or soul

that God cares about and judges, because that's the core of who we are. If we cultivate wrath in our heart, we're already corrupting the very center of our self, even if we never get around to acting out our anger.

Now there is a kind of anger that's legitimate, even a good thing. If we see an injustice and it makes us mad, so that we're motivated to make things right, that's a good anger. If our children do something that might hurt them or someone else, and they don't stop when we tell them nicely, a constructive anger ratchets up the urgency and gets their attention so they know they need to change their behavior. In that sense, anger is a kind of moral pain. Just as a pain in the body says, "There's something wrong here; you need to fix it," so anger says, "There's something wrong with this situation; you need to do something about this."

In fact, we only get angry over things we care about – which is why, if we *don't* get angry sometimes, it may mean we don't care enough about something we should. If we didn't care when our children did hurtful things we might never get angry with them, but that might also mean we didn't love them enough to correct them. The prophets in the Bible rail against injustice when people don't care enough to make things right.

So anger can be good if it moves us to do the right thing. We ought to be angry about domestic violence, and child abuse, and the fact that people go hungry when they could be fed, or suffer from preventable diseases that could be cured – if being angry moves us to do something about it.

The Letter to the Ephesians says, "Be angry but do not sin." That raises the obvious question, when does legitimate anger cross over the line and become sinful wrath?

Part of the answer lies in what motivates the anger. Is it a legitimate concern, like a response to some wrong or injustice? Or is it just a matter of pride, or jealousy, or envy that makes us mad? I mentioned Shakespeare's *Othello* last week when we talked about envy. Othello flies into a rage when he's convinced that Desdemona has been unfaithful to him. It isn't true: on the contrary, Desdemona is all faithfulness and loyalty. But the evil Iago convinces Othello that his wife has betrayed him, and so his anger swells until, in a fit of rage, he kills her. The play is a tragedy because it didn't have to be that way. But when wrath takes over, we stop looking for the truth and let our fury drive us

wherever it will. The deadly sins are deadly also because they kill our self-control.

In recent years, brain science has shown that anger can literally short-circuit the brain, bypassing reason and moving us directly from emotion to action, without much thought in between. This is part of the famous fight-or-flight response, where, if a creature is in danger, it has to gear up quickly either to run away or to stand its ground and fight.

What's useful in fighting off saber-tooth tigers or the hostile tribe next door is not so useful when we have to get along in society, or even in our homes, with people who make us angry sometimes. We've all had experiences where we've said things in anger, or someone has said things in anger to us, and afterwards we say, "I didn't mean that. I was just upset." We don't think straight when we're angry, and the angrier we are, the less clearly we think. So the proverbial advice about counting to 10 before we speak is a way of hitting the reset button in our brain, and letting reason back in before we lash out in anger.

Feeding the habit of anger is bad for our soul, bad for relationships, and bad for society. Another finding of science is that the more we use certain pathways in the brain the more we reinforce them. "Neurons that fire together, wire together," as they say. In other words, habits become hardwired in our brains. People who get angry a lot habitually fly off the handle. We all know people like that. "He has a temper," we say, or "She has a short fuse." Those people's brains become hardwired for anger. For some, the pleasure centers in the brain actually connect with anger, so they get a kind of high from being mad – they enjoy being angry.

What separates legitimate anger from wrath is partly a matter of motivation, then – whether it's driven by a concern to right some wrong, on the one hand, or by pride or jealousy or just the fact that we like being mad, on the other. Another thing that separates legitimate anger from wrath is what we do with it – that is, not only where it comes from, but where it goes.

Anger needs to go *somewhere*. Anger that stays bottled up inside is always destructive. At a minimum, it makes people cranky and miserable and hard to live with. Often it comes out in oblique ways, as when little things set people off – because it isn't really about the little things at all, but about some bigger issue that's unresolved. Sometimes anger comes out in sickness: gastric trouble, or high blood pressure, or heart disease, for example. And anger turned inward

can lead to depression; if people can't get mad at anyone else, or even mad at God, they get mad at themselves and become depressed.

Anger needs to go somewhere, which is why it's so important that we learn to let go of our anger. We all need a safe place to vent sometimes, someone to talk to, or some activity that lets us work off frustration in a way that no one gets hurt. Venting is a great image, actually. If pressure builds up in a boiler and there's no valve to let off steam, it can explode. If toxic gases build up in a home and there's no way to release them, people get sick. Anger is as toxic to the soul as noxious gases are to the body. We have to let it go.

So part of the solution to wrath, or excessive anger, is never to keep it bottled up inside. Find a safe way to let it out, so that no one gets hurt. The other part of the solution, though, is to let anger give way to something better.

That brings us to the biblical notion of the wrath of God. There are some passages in the Bible, especially in the Old Testament, where a kind of vengeful fury is attributed to God that makes us shudder. Those texts are troubling, and we don't have time to say much about them today. But there are many passages in the Bible that point to how God's righteous anger gives way to mercy and compassion, and I want to close with a little reflection on that.

We've already said that a certain kind of anger can be a sign of love. If we don't care about someone, we might not get angry when we see things that hurt her – whether she does them herself or somebody else does them to her. But if we love someone, we pay attention to anything that affects her. And if we see some behavior that might harm her, a caring anger says, "This isn't right," and we want to do what it takes to protect her.

Something like that goes on in the heart of God. The righteous anger of God rises up when God sees us doing things that will hurt someone – either ourselves or somebody else, whether we realize it or not. God says, "No! That isn't right. You need to stop that!" In that sense, God gets angry with us – not as the opposite of love, but precisely because God loves us enough to care about what we do, and about what happens to us as a result.

In some of the deepest passages of scripture, God's anger gives way to compassion and grace, because the motive is love and the purpose is to save us. God's anger always comes *from* love and moves *toward* salvation. Lots of passages in the Bible say that. One of my favorites is in Isaiah 54:

For a brief moment I abandoned you, but with great compassion I will gather you. In overflowing wrath for a moment I hid my face from you, but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you, says the Lord, your Redeemer (Is. 54:7-8)

Sometimes the things we do make God angry, and it's as though God turns away for a moment, out of the sheer pain of watching his children make such a mess of things. But then anger gives way to compassion, and God turns toward us again, to heal and to save us.

This tension between God's anger and God's compassion appears most clearly in the life and death and resurrection of Christ. In Jesus Christ, God takes the weight of our sin upon himself. The pain of seeing his children do things that harm themselves and others is borne by God alone, consumed as in a fire by the purifying wrath of God – except that the fire burns within God's own self until there is nothing left but love.

And because God's anger gives way to compassion, we who are being made new in Christ must learn to do the same. By the power of the Holy Spirit, we must be gradually transformed, until all our anger too grows out of love and gives way in the end to grace and reconciliation.