

“7--Wrath”

Today we're talking about the next of the seven deadly sins called wrath, or anger. **The Seven Deadly Sins: Lust, Gluttony, Greed, Sloth, Wrath, Envy, Pride.** We're talking about these seven deadlies, because if we can name them, and identify them, see them when they're coming, then we can avoid them. This isn't about you and me feeling guilty or ashamed. It's about us being empowered and free. Jesus said, "I've come so that you might have life and have it to the full." We have to talk about sin so that we avoid those things that drain us of life, that empty us of joy, that kill our relationship with God and with other people. And if we're going to have life, we've got to deal with anger. Of course, not all anger is bad or sinful. Anger is actually a response, a reaction, an emotion. It's what we do with this response that's important. And if we handle our response of anger in the wrong way, that's when it's deadly. Literally.

We live in some pretty angry times. Phrases like "road rage" and "going postal" are a part of our vocabulary. And lots of us are always close to the boiling point. Under normal circumstances we can keep our cool. Right now you don't look angry or like you're about to explode. You look calm on the outside. Relaxed. Quiet. But if you're like a lot of Americans, under the surface you are near the boiling point. At any moment, something could happen, someone could do something, or say something that bumps up your temperature a few degrees and you boil over, lash out, blow up. The anger that comes out is hurtful, even deadly.

According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, around 40,000 people are killed each year in traffic accidents and approximately 25% of those are a result of road rage. A restaurant owner and a software engineer start mixing it up on a dangerous mountain road between San Jose and Santa Cruz. When it was over, the software engineer was dead by the side of the freeway, a .380-caliber bullet through his aorta.

Outside Washington, D.C., two angry drivers chasing each other at more than 80 miles an hour crash into commuter traffic, leaving three people dead. Anger destroys. Road rage is just one form of anger.

Then there's the anger that comes into our homes toward spouses and children. There's the anger that we focus toward our bosses. There is the anger and rage that leads to rape, murder, the destruction of property and lives. Those are the tragically visible forms of anger. Then there is the kind of anger that we harbor inside of us. We get angry at people, at God, at our life situation and stuff it down inside of us. We may never show that anger, but it sits in there eating away at us, making us hate, making us miserable.

In my own life I've got some healthy and unhealthy examples of anger. A few years back I'd been sick for weeks with bronchitis. I felt terrible; I couldn't sleep well. For two Sundays in a row I could barely talk and coughed through the messages. I was literally sick and tired, and, in that state, ready to boil over. It was a Wednesday evening and I was supposed to speak here at church for the Alpha class. I had my talk ready but when it came time to actually speak, I couldn't do it. I'd get a few words out and then start coughing. A few more words, another coughing fit. I could not talk. I had to ask one of the small group leaders to come up and speak and I left the room.

I walked out to get some water and couldn't stop coughing. At that point I just got in my car and went home, and I was ticked! I got home and got a glass out of the cupboard to get a drink of water and that cupboard door wouldn't stay closed. And so I slammed it. And it felt good! But, again, it didn't close. So I slammed it again...harder. And again. It kept baiting me by staying open just a little bit. I started saying words that I would never say in public—like darn, and gosh, and fiddlesticks. I slammed it again, harder. And again, and again until that cupboard door broke off its hinges. Nobody was home. Thankfully. And before Janet got home I had clamped and glued it all back together. And my cough was better.

Isn't that a flattering story? Don't you feel better about me being a pastor in your church? Now I'm not proud of that moment. It was immature, it was out of control. That cupboard door never did fit quite right after that. But I share that story as a reminder that people get angry, even normal-looking, seminary-trained kind of people have moments of anger that can be embarrassing, or even hurtful to themselves and others.

But here's the thing. A lot of the time we don't even know why we have these feelings. Some of us don't even know that we're angry, and the worst part is we don't know what to do about it. But what if there were a way, a different way, a way that would change all that?

It's interesting that in the U.S. we use the words "angry" and "mad" interchangeably. "Watch out, mom is mad!" "The boss is mad." "Give me some space, I'm mad!" But **the word "mad" actually means insane, or crazy. The word "angry" actually means having "strong feelings of displeasure."**

What I'm getting at here is that being angry should not be interchangeable with going insane, and doing things that are destructive, dangerous, out of control and sinful. Paul says to the Christians in Ephesus, **"Be angry but do not sin..." (Ephesians 4:26, NRSV)**. In other words, it's OK to be angry; it's OK to have to strong feelings of displeasure. But it's not OK to let that anger build into actions that are sinful. It's not OK to throw tantrums, frying pans or fists.

According to the Bible there is a way to express anger constructively, but it's not easy. Proverbs 16:32 says, **"One who is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and one whose temper is controlled [is better] than one who captures a city" (Proverbs 16:32, NRSV)**. I appreciate this passage. The writer's saying that sometimes it takes more strength and courage to control our emotions than it does to capture a fortified city!

We may not know for sure why some of us have shorter anger-fuses than others, but one thing we can know for sure is that God created us with the capacity to get angry. In fact, sometimes God gets angry. We see it in the Bible when God's anger is kindled against sin and injustice. Psalm 30:5 says that **God's "anger lasts only a moment, but his favor lasts a life time" (Psalm 30:5, NIV)**. Over and over the Bible repeats what Psalm 145 says, **"The LORD is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love" (Psalm 145:8, NIV)**.

So, yes, God gets angry, but we need to know that his anger is never the end of the story. God's anger is real, but it only lasts for a little while. His love goes far beyond his anger. Since we're made in God's image we've got that same built-in capacity to experience anger. And if God himself gets angry, we know that it's not a sinful emotion. God's anger is righteous and ours can be too. Our anger, when we manage it in the right ways, can energize us to take actions that are good and right.

In fact, some of the best actions Christians have taken were prompted by anger. There have been times when I've gotten so angry at myself because I've repeated mistakes, or failures, or sin that my anger at myself helped me to do what I needed to do to make a change.

Many Christians have gotten so angry over injustices they've seen around them that their anger prompted them to start new ministries to support others. There are many God-honoring things that have occurred over time because somebody got angry about an injustice and did something constructive about it.

That kind of anger is not a problem. The problem is that a lot of times we don't know how to manage our anger. And thankfully Jesus helps us diagnose and deal with anger. That brings us to Jesus' words from Matthew, Chapter 5. Jesus says: **"You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother or sister will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, 'Raca,' is answerable to the Sanhedrin. And anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell" (Matthew 5: 21-22)**.

Let's make sure we are clear about what Jesus is saying here. He's saying, "You've learned to follow the command to not commit murder, but I say that just keeping that rule has not made you loving. There is a kind of anger in you that is just as damaging." Jesus is talking about a kind of anger that turns into deep resentment or contempt for somebody else. The word Jesus uses for anger points to an on-going grudge that a person might hold against someone else for days, weeks, months or years.

Anyone here ever hold a grudge? Some of you might have a name or face in mind right now... It kind of becomes a part of who you are. You start to need that anger to feel good about yourself. But Jesus says, "No, that kind of anger is dangerous and damaging."

Jesus is talking about a kind of anger that says "*Raca*" to another person. The word *raca* is an Aramaic word that literally means "stupid." It's basically like saying, "You idiot!" Ever been driving down the road and had someone cut you off? Ever have a friend or co-worker who keeps making the same mistake? And when those things happen our instinctive response is to think things like... "How thoughtful. That's so wonderful that you did that. You are a great person." No... We think to ourselves, "What an idiot! What kind of a person would do something like that?" And Jesus says, "That kind of anger is dangerous and damaging."

Jesus is talking about a kind of anger that says “You fool” to another person. That language doesn’t sound too harmful, but the Greek word here is *moros*. The theologian Dallas Willard says the modern equivalent of that word “moros” would be something more like “You f-ing jerk!”

A lot of us think these things, even if we’ve trained ourselves to not say them out loud, especially about people we think really deserve it. And there are people we actually think deserve it. Jesus says, “That kind of anger is dangerous and damaging.”

Too many of us struggle with this kind of anger every single day: Anger that becomes a deep resentment of others. Anger that dismisses the competency of others. Anger that attacks the value of another human being.

Before we move on, there’s something that we just have to know and own: That even if you feel incredible anger today at another person, or even at God himself, Jesus tells us that God’s heart remains warm and tender for you. In the story of the prodigal son, after he realizes what he’s done he comes home and his father welcomes him. But his older brother is angry at how welcoming the father is of his son who had wasted everything. That father, Jesus is telling us, is like our heavenly father. He loves both sons—the one who wasted everything and ran away AND the angry one.

It’s good, it’s necessary, to know that God’s heart is always for us, but knowing is not enough. Jesus wants to teach us a way of life that not only addresses the cause of our anger, but also leads to healing. So Jesus says this: **“Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to that person; then come and offer your gift. Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court. Do it while you are still together on the way, or your adversary may hand you over to the judge, and the judge may hand you over to the officer, and you may be thrown into prison. Truly I tell you, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny” (Matthew 5: 23-26).**

So what’s in this “new way of life” that Jesus gives us to deal with our anger? Three quick practical observations from these verses. **First Jesus makes dealing with our anger priority number one.**

You see, in that day, the most important moment in a person’s spiritual life was bringing a gift or sacrifice to the altar. It was the most important part of a person’s relationship with God, which means Jesus is saying that whatever is most important in your spiritual life... Prayer. Church. Worship. Community. Study. He says stop, put it down, go deal with your anger. In other words, dealing with your anger is more important than the most important thing.

So what’s the most important thing on your agenda this week? Because it’s just become number two on your list. Dealing with your anger is more important than the most important thing

A second observation from Jesus’ instructions is to deal with it now. **“Don’t delay confrontation.”** Do not wait. He gives the example of a lawsuit and says go and settle matters quickly, while you are still on your way to court. Jesus is trying to quicken the pace when it comes to resolving conflict with others. So we don’t wait weeks, months, or years before having that conversation. Yes, there are times when we need to cool down. Sometimes you need to take a walk for 30 minutes to understand what’s going on. Sometimes we need to collect our thoughts and feelings, so we can think and speak clearly. But that’s not the same as saying, “I’ll get to it sometime later when I have more time.” Jesus says do your best to settle things quickly. Don’t delay confrontation.

And a third and final observation from Jesus’ instructions is that Jesus confronts our tendency to discuss our anger with other people before, or instead of, going to the actual person. Jesus says the next step is to **Go to the source of the anger.** Do NOT go to the person who wants to hear the latest gossip, or your fave five on your cell phone.

Sometimes the situation is severe enough that you need to seek objective counsel on how you can move forward, but how much more often do you find yourself in a situation where you could simply go to a person and say, “This thing you did or said was hurtful and I want to talk about it.” But instead you went to a third party and said, “Can you believe that so-and-so did or said this?” And hey, I’m guilty of this too.

But, Jesus calls us to go to the source of our anger or conflict and start there. If someone comes to you and starts tearing into someone else, the best thing you can do is say, "Have you talked to that person? Because if you haven't you should start with them, and then see if you still need my advice. "

Don't dismiss it, or delay confrontation, or first go to third parties. It's so simple, and yet these are so hard to do, aren't they? But these are the kind of actions that Jesus says will change our hearts, will set us free, and will make us whole. If you want to really stretch your imagination, think about what would happen if our community learned to live this way. The alternative is not good.

Earlier this year I came about as close to getting into a fight as I have ever been. I was with a friend, and a friend of that friend. We were just sitting around talking at my friend's house when the conversation took a sudden turn. The friend of the friend started to vent about some things. And that's fine. But venting turned into blaming, and blaming turned into a whole lot of racist remarks. In the middle of his rant he looked over at me and he could tell I was starting to bristle. He asked me, "Am I offending you?" That was the right question to ask and so I said, "As a matter of fact you are." And then I let him have it about how shallow and ignorant all that was. I didn't lose my cool. I didn't lose my temper. I didn't call him *raca*, or an f-ing jerk. But I let him know where I stood.

And I let him know how sad it was to me that his fear and anger had enslaved him. That he was not free. He said, "I know I'm not free. But that's just the way I am because of things that happen to me in my past." I told him, "You don't have to be this way. You can let go of things in your past. You can let go of the anger. You can be free to enjoy the blessings you have in life." That's about when he got in face, that's about when I thought I'd have to defend myself. And thankfully he just made some parting remarks and walked out.

There's a reason the ancients told us that anger is one of the seven deadlies. It will eat you up alive. It will shorten your life. It will kill relationships. It will kill your ability to enjoy the blessing you have right in front of you.

If you or somebody you know is being controlled by anger, enslaved by it, remember that it doesn't have to be that way. Remember that even if you're overwhelmed with anger, God still loves you, and he's given you the way to be free.

Anger is deadly. Jesus said, "I've come so that you might have life and have it to the full." That's why he taught us to manage our anger in the right ways. Let's do it his way and live. And for today, that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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