

Wrath: Hellish Passion

Ephesians 4:20-32 (NSMC Deadly Sins)

In the spring of 1894, the Baltimore Orioles went to Boston to play a routine baseball game. But what happened that day was anything but routine. The Orioles' John McGraw got into a fight with the Boston third baseman. Within minutes all the players from both teams had joined in the brawl. The warfare quickly spread to the grandstands. Among the fans the conflict went from bad to worse. Someone set fire to the stands and the entire ballpark burned to the ground. This fire spread to 107 other Boston buildings as well.

Wrath is the most obvious of the seven deadly sins. Wrath blinds us. In the passion story, it is the wrath of humankind, not God, that kills Jesus. And how often do we hear of someone who does something terrible but family, friends and neighbours say; they were such a nice person"? Somehow, events got out of control.

Benjamin Franklin said, "Anger is never without a reason, but seldom with a good one." Anger or wrath makes the list of the seven deadly sins because for centuries people have witnessed its destructive power and influence. But understanding anger gets much more complicated than simply looking at its effects. Anger is not merely a sin that causes chaos; it's an emotion that is indicative of something deeper - something in the subconscious desires of the human heart. This begins the hard, but critical work of digging beneath the surface to find the root-sin of anger.

So let's recognize some facts about anger.

First, let's accept anger is a secondary emotion and action. Marcia Cannon, in the book, *The Gift of Anger*, writes, "You become angry when you define reality as unacceptable and you feel unable to easily correct it, tolerate it, or let it go." Anger is symptomatic of circumstances we consider unacceptable. Which means, anger is inherently reactionary, not the first emotion. We gain insight by looking at that unacceptable thing that we are angry about. Sometimes the reason for our anger is easy to discern. Other

times we really have to dig deep and be very honest about ourselves, our motives, our pain, our disappointments and our own mistakes. Anger is a whistle-blower, the alarm, for a deeper, darker devotion & priority in the soul.

Anger is one of the first sins in the Bible. God warned Cain, "Why are you angry? Just do what's right, because sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must rule over it." (4:4b-7) However, he killed his brother Abel - a second response after not feeling accepted, jealousy and disappointment.

Second, anger is so dangerous that Jesus connects our anger with murder. He said, "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that every one who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment" (Mt. 5:21-22).

One writer comments, "Jesus says that not just the deed, but even the first upsurge, feeling, of illegitimate anger - even if not expressed in a single word - made people liable to judgment."

Murder and anger are joined together on the same continuum. Jesus considers them so closely related, they are virtually equivalent. In light of God's judgment, murder and anger are different forms of the same condemnable offense. That's why the apostle John unequivocally wrote, "Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer." (1 J. 3:15) And he said it several different ways and several times.

A Third fact is, anger like any sin is an act against God. There are a few exceptions that we will look at later. When love and injustice is at stake, it might be a reason to get carefully angry. But we need to remember, anger like any sin, is ultimately an act against God.

Fourth, anger, like pride, is among the most widespread sins. It infects people of all ages. It erupts out of nowhere at the most unusual times. As a wife said to me about her husband, after his behavior caused the congregation to not vote as he wanted them to - "I told him not

to attend.” We know as Romans 3:23 says, “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” We could say, “All have been angry and fall short of the glory of God.”

Fifth, anger may be the most dangerous of the deadly sins. We know “The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (R. 6:23) The uncontrolled, uninhibited expression of anger can quite literally kill someone else. But it can also spiritually and physically kill the angry person. I’ve had a few parishioners, fortunately a very few, who I believe got sick and died because of their anger, resentment, pain, and unwillingness to forgive and love.

The 18th-century British physician John Hunter who was a pioneer in the field of surgery and served as surgeon to King George III, suffered from angina. Discovering that his attacks were often brought on by anger, Hunter lamented, “My life is at the mercy of any scoundrel who chooses to put me in a passion.” These words proved prophetic. He chose to be a victim. At a meeting of the board of St. George’s Hospital in London, Hunter got into a heated argument with board members, walked out, and dropped dead in the next room. He chose to be a victim.

We don’t yet know exactly why anger is so much more personally & physically dangerous than fear or mental stress. So until we see more research on this subject, it couldn’t hurt to count to 10 before we blow our stacks. Like hold off on that email or text or tweet for 24 hours. Take time to figure out, analyze, what triggered you.

The **sixth** fact of anger is: we know anger is so dangerous and socially unacceptable, so we try to hide it and deny it. In some communities and cultures, the person who exhibits anger – has lost the argument – regardless of the truth and facts. Expressing or displaying anger is so taboo with some people, that when it does occur, it’s often seen as a greater sin than the wrong that caused the anger.

And with our peace and community emphasis, we become good at wearing masks, at hiding

our anger. Many people have written about the masks we wear. Sometimes we have learned to be so good at this that we don’t even know we are angry. But people around us sense and even see the steam coming out of our ears. Unrecognized anger, will find a way to come out - either in tone of voice, desire for control, body language, illness, or revenge.

Why do we get angry? There are many reasons. One of the primary reasons for anger comes from **family patterns**, learned behavior. Angry people often come from angry families because they learn from their role models and carry on the same behavior in their own lives, passing it on to their children.

Tommy Bolt has been described as the angriest golfer in the history of the game. One story recalls a time when Tommy was giving a group lesson on how to hit a ball out of a sand trap. Calling his eleven-year-old son over, he said, “Show the people what you’ve learned from your father when your shot lands in the sand.” The boy picked up a golf club and threw it as high and as far as he could.

There are all kinds of reasons why we get angry. More than we can mention because the causes for anger are as varied as there are people. Anger seems to be like pain. It tells us some thing is wrong. We need to take care of whatever it is that is wrong. But when we lash out in anger instead of dealing with it in constructive ways then we step into wrath, which is reserved for God like vengeance.

Bottled up anger always leaks out. Instead, as Ephesians 4:26 instructs, let’s expect we will be angry at times. But: “‘In your anger do not sin.’ Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, & do not give the devil a foothold.”

God's Wrath Is A Sign Of Love

Romans 1:18-20, 12:9; Mark 3:1-6, 10:13-16

A lady once came to Billy Sunday, a baseball player and then a well known evangelist. She tried to rationalize her angry outbursts. "There's nothing wrong with losing my temper," she said. "I blow up, and then it's all over."

"So does a shotgun," Sunday replied, "and look at the damage it leaves behind!"

Frederick Buechner offers another perspective. "Of the 7 deadly sins, anger is possibly the most fun. To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll over your tongue the prospect of bitter confrontations still to come, to savor to the last toothsome morsel both the pain you are given and the pain you are giving back - in many ways it is a feast fit for a king. The chief drawback is that what we are wolfing down is ourselves. The skeleton at the feast is ourselves.

There is lots of material to help us understand and manage anger. I encourage you to do some research on your own. Ask your family, friends, & co-workers about your anger patterns.

When we are angry, **we must choose our pain.** Digging deep to take care of the bad root of why we are angry is painful. But it's the only lasting way to take care of the problem. We can't wish it away, ignore it, or stuff it. We can either suffer positively, doing what's right or we can go with the devil's plan for us to let loose our steam. Remember, the same devil that tempts us to follow our human feelings will later condemn us for doing it. We must decide if we want the pain that will take us into a new maturity and witness for Jesus, or to keep our same old pain and try to hide it, mask it, while it's rotting inside us.

And, I suspect, anger, **may be the most complicated of the 7 deadly sins.** Because there are so many reasons we get angry. There are many methods of expressing our anger. Anger is somehow involved in our attitudes & treatment of sin. And it's all complicated by

God getting angry. Plus, it can be argued that the opposite of anger is not love – but indifference. This is different than the other deadly sins. Humility drowns out pride. Generosity helps conquer Greed. Lust gives way to Chastity, and so on.

But anger is a form of love that so easily gets out of control. It is why we respond to whatever threatens someone or something we care about. How we perceive and respond to reality has to do with what we value. If we can think of anger as love in motion to protect the object of that love – which too often is ourselves, then we can work through our anger. If we want to know what we are angry about, we should look to the objects of our affection. And if we want to know when anger is sinful, we look for how our loves have become distorted. This explains why the problem of anger is so pervasive and dangerous. We were created to love God most and best, but too often we prefer ourselves and the things that serve us.

In your bulletin insert under **kinds of anger** is a list of four, with scripture references. The last one is sanctified anger. This is the exception to anger as sin that I mentioned earlier.

Wrath is the only one of the Seven Deadly Sins we **attribute to God.** One definition of sin is: "all thought, word or deed that is contrary to the will of God." But this raises questions. We know God's anger caused him to flood the whole earth. After the golden calf, the Creator wanted to destroy his creatures. Many Old Testament prophets messages are full of godly anger. Jesus roused out the merchants and money changers in the temple courtyard. More than once, "Jesus looked around at the Jewish religious leaders with anger, and grieved at their hardness of heart." (Mark 3:5).

So there is a place for sanctified or righteous anger. We should get angry about the sins that God gets angry about. But we need to be very careful of our motives. Unrighteous anger causes us to not be holy. Righteous anger is us joining with God in his wrath. Scripture commands us to "hate what is evil." (R 12:9)

The Bible tells us “If you hunger and thirst for righteousness, blessed are you!” (Matt 5:6)

David Seamands wrote: A person who is angry on the right grounds, against the right persons, in the right manner, at the right moment, and for the right length of time deserves great praise. Anger is a divinely implanted emotion. It is closely allied to our instinct for rights, fairness, and justice. It is designed to be used for constructive spiritual purposes and for working toward what God desires - shalom. The person who cannot feel anger at evil is a person who lacks enthusiasm for good. If we cannot hate wrong, it's very questionable whether we really love righteousness and holiness.”

If we can't get angry at our own sinful, bad behavior, we are not on the way to repentance, fixing it, and replacing that anger with love.

So there's nothing wrong with getting angry to a degree if somebody slights your reputation. We are told, “In your anger do not sin.’ Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold.” This great life giving advice.

But why are we ten times - a 100 times - angrier when we are slighted, than some horrible injustice being done to people in another part of the world? Or even here in Saskatchewan?

Did you see several weeks ago, the program The Fifth Estate, about crime in Regina? It was an eye opening hour as they talked about structural, racist, cultural, joblessness as well as the police response, as reasons for the upsurge in crime. How to respond was a theme. I want to suggest that in our busyness and focus on pleasure, it's so easy to not become angry because we are not paying attention. Or we are indifferent. Or we just blame those involved. We are indifferent. But the situations, feelings and facts that were shared – should make us angry.

This is the stuff we should be outraged about. I suspect God is. What can we do to bring about

change? Well, it starts in our attitudes, love and that new heart in each of us that God implants, – by becoming appropriately angry. One beacon of hope in the North Central neighborhood comes in a group of mostly indigenous women who patrol the streets, collecting used needles, building relationships and raising the spirits of community members. They call themselves the White Pony Lodge.

A writer wrote, "A man who cannot be angry, cannot be merciful." The person who cannot be angry at things which prevent God's love and purposes toward people is living too far away from their fellow humans ever to feel anything positive towards them. Anger usually is a selfish sin. But we should be angry more often when we see things that go against God's peace and grace. I hope these ideas give you some helpful perspectives about anger. So go and be angry but sin not!

Love is the virtue, the counter to anger. It's the baseline for followers of Jesus. Jesus' last words – “Forgive them they know not what they do” and “You will join me in paradise today,” are examples for us. This kind of love is at the core, the heart of Jesus and God.

And Scripture tells us, God gets angry (Romans 1:18), but God never sins (James 1:13; Heb. 4:15). So then our anger - when expressed rightly, about what brings God's wrath - must not be sin. I suspect it's a form of love, which is a much better witness than indifference, hopelessness and leads to some action.

Love is the source from which all other virtues originate. Each of the seven deadly sins is a perversion of love. Once love is transformed, we find that all our virtues point us to the call to live out the love of God. To even have Godly anger. So let's be angry about the right things. And work on our anger about the wrong things. And most of all, let's not deny when we are angry and nurture it. Instead let's nurture and pass on the love we have received from Jesus Christ.