

## **Deadly Sins and Life-Giving Virtues: Wrath and Mercy**

**James 1:19-20 Ephesians 4:25—5:2**

Our series for Lent: the 7 deadly sins. Here they are, in an order in which I am accustomed to seeing them: pride, wrath (anger), envy, lust, gluttony, sloth and greed. Reminder: 7 deadly sins are deadly because they squelch love, not because they will kill us or because God will smite us with a bolt of lightning or something like that. They are deadly to the flow of love into and out of our lives—which is why we're looking at life-giving virtues, which open the flow of love.

Today, we're talking about wrath, or anger. I prefer to use the traditional word wrath because if we say "anger," then that may lead us to believe that the feeling of anger is a sin, which it isn't. Anger can actually be a sign that you have a pulse, and that you care. It's when anger is allowed to fester and linger and turn into something else that causes us to act in unloving ways toward others or toward ourselves that it can become deadly.

Here is a rich text from the apostle Paul, one of the places where the New Testament speaks to this.

## **Ephesians 4:25-5:2**

So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil (literally, “the divider”). Verse 29: Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.

Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

This is the word of the Lord.

One of my favorite pieces of advice about anger comes from Mark Twain.

Mark Twain’s advice about anger was, “When angry, count to 10. When *very* angry, swear!”

To experience anger is to be human. Even *Jesus* got angry! The first thing Jesus does on Palm Sunday after he enters Jerusalem is go into the temple and overturn the money changers’ tables and drive them out. He was pretty upset about the corruption that was taking place there, in God’s name! At one point he calls the Pharisees whitewashed tombs and hard-hearted hypocrites. Jesus probably wasn’t wearing a t-shirt with a smiley-face that said “Have a nice day”

when he did and said those things. He sometimes grumps at his disciples when they don't catch on to what he is showing them and teaching them. In fact, on one of those occasions he calls Peter Satan. Jesus meek and mild, right? Not always!

So there *is* a righteous type of anger. But we need to be very careful with that. As the cliché goes: “anger” is one letter short of “danger.” Handling anger is like handling nitroglycerine. It can heal a heart, or it can cause an explosion and a lot of damage.

So, because it's such a powerful emotion Jesus addresses this in his teachings, and so does Paul. Quite frequently, actually. Look at all of Paul's lists in his letters: what to stop doing, what to start doing; what to put off, what to put on; this is your old life, this is your new life in Christ, and so forth. In his letter to the Galatians he says, “Put away all bitterness, wrath, anger and slander.” In his letter to the Colossians, he says “Put away all bitterness, wrath, anger and slander.” In Ephesians (as we heard) he says, “Put away all bitterness, wrath, anger and slander.” Paul has a habit of repeating himself! Either he's forgotten he's said it, or he's trying to make a point. And in all of these letters he reminds

God's people of Jesus' words, quoted from Leviticus of all places: "Love your neighbor as yourself." "For love is the fulfilling of the law."

And for good measure, James says (1:19-20): "let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry." Okay okay, we get the point! And btw, it's easy to miss that James calls us "beloved." That's an important and easy to miss salutation in most of the epistles of the New Testament. The challenges and encouragements that we receive come to us as God's beloved.

I love the Bible because it's so realistic and so honest about life and human nature, and human struggle. So, this topic of anger is addressed a lot in the Bible because it's a very real human emotion and experience.

It needs to be said, that when Jesus or Paul talk about anger, they are not mainly warning about the moment of anger, the flash of fire, where in an instant we react to something or someone; they are warning against the deeper burning coals of what has traditionally been called wrath, or what we might call resentment—when anger has morphed into something more than what it began as. Anger often begins as a desire for some wrong to be made right, or as a response to an offense we experienced that revealed to us a need to protect ourselves or someone or something we love. Even if it's our reaction to, say,

someone running a stop sign or turning in front of us without looking (or on purpose). There may be a reaction of anger—and underneath that it's usually fear—but that reaction is a protective instinct. That's not a bad thing. It becomes bad when anger turns into road rage.

In that sense, anger is an appropriate and perhaps even a healthy reaction. I'll come back to this in a moment.

So the issue isn't whether we feel anger or not. Of course we will—notice that James doesn't say "Don't be angry." He says, "*Be slow* to anger." Paul doesn't say, "Don't be angry." He says, "Don't let the sun go down on your anger." In other words, don't let it linger and fester. So the issue isn't whether we feel anger or not; the issue is, what do we do with it? Jesus and Paul seem to suggest that we can choose to do something with it as soon as humanly possible, or, we can hold onto it. And if we hold onto it, it becomes unhealthy and harmful to love and relationships. Parker Palmer: "Anger isn't the problem. The problem is getting *hooked* on anger—addicted to an emotion that gives you a fleeting high but leaves you feeling worse, all the while robbing you of well-being and creating an insatiable desire for the next hit. Being hooked saps me of energy and harms

my health.” (pg. 154, *On the Brink of Everything*). And ultimately, it can block the flow of love into and out of our lives.

Getting back to Paul’s wise words from our Ephesians reading... He says, “Don’t let the sun go down on your anger,” quoting from Psalm 4:4. Some of you may have been told by parents, “Don’t go to bed angry,” which is a good rule of thumb, and, a very literal interpretation of the text. But sometimes that’s hard to do, and, honestly, it’s not always the best thing to do. Sometimes we *need* to sleep on it and get refreshed or get ourselves calmed down, or we *might* say or do something we regret later.

The point is, make an effort to do your best to resolve it soon. Don’t put it off. And sometimes that may require talking with a person you’re in conflict with. Paul says, “Speak the truth in love.” In the sermon on the mount, Jesus says, “Go and reconcile with your adversary.” It’s risky, but with fear and trembling, we are encouraged to go! This can be hard, and the truth is the other person might not reciprocate. But we are encouraged to go anyway. What I hear them saying is, always be the one to make the first move (repeat). Direct conversations are always the best conversations, and they are best when they happen as soon as possible. With love, of course. We may need help and advice, or some support

on having these conversations, and it's always good to seek wise counsel when needed. Yet we shouldn't avoid doing the good and loving work of building one another up through honest conversation. With the goal of mutual edification.

So, Jesus and Paul encourage us: don't hold onto anger; as you are able, and in the right time and in a process of both self-compassion and compassion for others, work at releasing it.

**Or...** work at channeling that anger into something constructive. If witnessing or hearing about injustice or wrongdoing angers you, instead of fuming about it or taking it out on someone nearby, channel that anger into constructive action. Write a letter to a local leader, volunteer your time and energy toward something positive, or write your own prayer of petition and lament. Like David does in a lot of the Psalms. He lets it all hang out, and sometimes lets God have it when he sees injustice. God is not fragile; God can handle our anger, and in fact welcomes our honest expressions.

Because, again, sometimes anger is telling us that something is wrong, and we can do *something* somewhere to make *something* right. Maybe we can't directly or singlehandedly solve the injustice we're upset about, but we can do something to channel our energy toward something good. It can bring help and

consolation to others, and it can be therapeutic for us. I mean, we can't singlehandedly remove Vladimir Putin from leadership or stop the war in Ukraine, but we can stop the war in our head and heart and channel our anger at him toward making the world a better place somewhere within our sphere of influence, or we can bring aid to someone in need. Talk to Carla about how you can help out at Pathways for Women... Opportunities abound for us to be a presence of love in our world.

In the beatitudes, Jesus says, "Blessed are the merciful," and "Blessed are the peacemakers!" Mercy and peace are our antidotes, our vaccine if you will, for protecting our hearts from wrath. Again, sometimes mercy and peace are what we give to ourselves, and more often than not they are what we ask for from God as we extend mercy and peace to others.

I love the reminders in Scripture, and we used Psalm 103 a lot this morning, to remind us that "*The Lord is merciful and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.*" And so, when Paul says, "Be imitators of God..." there's a good place to start. With mercy and compassion, being slow to anger and... maybe not *abounding* in steadfast love and mercy—I don't know about you but I don't often feel *abounding* in love and mercy; I have a hard time being an

imitator of God in that way—but at least, perhaps, we can take steps toward being less grumpy or holding a grudge, and choosing to love my neighbor as myself in some tangible way.

Close with a couple comments...

In expressing mercy and grace, there is grace for us in the fact that we are to do the best we can when it comes to certain situations that are more hurtful than others, where emotions run deep and strong, and with the understanding that not all situations are the same, and not all people are the same. When we are encouraged to be merciful, or to reconcile, for example, we are to make *some* effort, with humility. Not perfectly or in some cookie cutter sort of way. The Bible never gives us “5 easy steps to reconciling,” and so forth. Because we will each do it in our own unique way, according to the situation at hand, and according to our personality and according to the time that’s needed. There is grace in this, in doing the best we are able.

It also needs to be said that there are some who have been deeply wounded by another person (in the form of assault, abuse, or some form of violence) and the harm that has been experienced and the lingering emotional struggles do not make it really possible for them to just go straight to the person

who wounded them and say 'I forgive you; let's be reconciled.' Those situations require special grace and a wider interpretation of Biblical principles, and maybe extra help from outside sources. Because mercy and forgiveness and reconciliation may take a long time in those situations, and in some instances real reconciliation is not possible. Forgiveness always is possible—even if it takes a while, and even if the other person has died. Forgiveness is always possible. But sometimes reconciliation may not be, or it may take time.

But in any situation where people have hurt each other and anger or other strong feelings come into play, we all need to rely on the forgiveness and grace of God, through Christ, and the strength God gives us to do this.

We need to **know** God's forgiveness and grace when we make mistakes in anger. We experience his compassion and not condemnation.

Then we need to **employ** his forgiveness and grace when someone comes to us with their confession, if they take steps toward us in seeking mercy. To receive it from them, and extend mercy and be reconciled if or when possible.

And if we are on the receiving end of a word of truth (if someone speaks the truth in love to us and confronts us with our faults) we need God's grace to help us listen and receive that as well and not say "How dare you!" or "It was your

fault!” James 1:19, again, applies very well to these situations: let everyone be quick to listen and slow to speak and slow to become angry.

We need to remember in all things that God, in Jesus Christ, made the first move toward us in mercy, peace, and reconciliation. Paul says that “while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.” Jesus practiced what he preached. He didn’t wait for us to come crawling to him on our hands and knees to apologize and get ourselves straightened out. He went ahead and gave his life for us before we did anything. He made the first move, and always makes the first move toward us, in love. And that’s what this sacrament celebrates this morning

All Who Hunger, Gather Gladly