

The Seven Deadly Sins: Wrath

In the name of him who faced the wrath of God to save us from it, dear friends in Christ: Last week when we began this series of meditations on the Seven Deadly Sins, we spent our time considering the sin of gluttony, which, we saw, is overindulgence – not just of food and drink like we normally think of it – but anything that can be abused through excessive consumption. Now, in retrospect, having made the comments I did, I thought I should offer a bit of a corrective. It's not always a sin to overdo it. From a biblical point of view there is an appropriate time for feasting. Think of the lavish banquet that Matthew, the tax collector turned disciple, threw to thank Jesus for rescuing him from a life of sin, or the wedding feast at Cana for which Jesus made *a whole lot* of wine for people who had already had plenty to drink. These were special occasions that called for festive, elaborate meals. I have no doubt that many of the guests at these celebrations – Jesus himself included – ate and drank more than was necessary. That doesn't make them guilty of the sin of gluttony. No, there's a time for feasting and there is a time for fasting; and the vast majority of the time in between calls for moderation in all things. Gluttony involves an ongoing lifestyle of excess. So enjoy your Thanksgiving get-togethers and other special occasions, and don't feel guilty about them even if you end up gaining a few pounds in the process. At the same time, I urge you to seriously consider adopting some kind of penitential self-discipline to enhance your spiritual journey through the season of Lent. It's like wise King Solomon said: there's a time everything.

And so also is there an appropriate time for expressing what has the potential to be the deadly sin that we'll be pondering this evening, which is wrath or anger. It's not necessarily a sin to be angry. As a matter of fact, even a casual glance through a standard Bible concordance will reveal that of the hundreds of times words like wrath, anger, fury, and indignation are used, over ninety percent of the time the subject is the Lord. According to the Scriptures, he's one angry fellow. We're constantly hearing of his burning wrath against sin, against the nations, against the enemies of his people, and chiefly against his own people as they stubbornly pursue their paths of idolatry and rebellion against him. You may remember too that Jesus was filled with righteous rage when he saw that the Temple of the Lord, his Father's House, had become a marketplace and a den of thieves. So anger itself is not sinful; indeed, under the right provocation, anger is the only fitting response.

Therefore in order for us to understand the deadly sin of wrath, we need to compare and contrast it to kind of wrath that is not sin. How can we do that? Well, obviously the Lord's wrath is not sinful. So let me suggest that when our anger is like the Lord's, it's perfectly appropriate. We run into trouble when our anger is not like the Lord's. So, what about the Lord's anger? How can we describe it? It has three characteristics that are worth noting.

First and foremost, the wrath of God just. Whenever the Lord is angry, he's got a very good reason for it. His wrath is never provoked by selfish feelings, petty emotions, or the honest mistakes of others. Nor can God's wrath can ever be described as capricious or arbitrary. If you're familiar with the mythologies of the ancient world, you know that the false gods could get angry with people for all kinds of crazy reasons.

Maybe they were jealous of someone's good looks or talents or popularity – or they may have been angry with a person just because they decided that they didn't like them. The Lord isn't like that.

What makes the Lord angry is sin – mankind's rebellion against him and his holy Law. It bears saying too that even though he is the primary offended party whenever someone sins, it's not for his own sake that he's angry. Instead it's for what the person who sins against him loses by destroying his or her relationship with the living God. He's angry when we are so foolish, stubborn, and self destructive that we cut ourselves off from him and the life and blessings he so earnestly desires to give us.

And too, it makes him angry when by our sins we hurt other people. Some of the sharpest passages that describe his burning wrath refer to those who abuse positions of wealth and power to corrupt justice and take advantage of the poor and powerless. Even harsher language is leveled against false teachers who by their words and actions lead others away from the Lord and a right understanding of his truth. Jesus said that anyone who would cause a child to stray into sin or unbelief could expect an especially hard dose of God's wrath.

Sin makes the Lord angry – and rightly so; and so it's right that we too are angered by it – if indeed we are angry for the same reasons that the Lord is. Such anger is just. But we need to be careful here. Much, likely most, of our anger is unjust. Why? Because rarely, if ever, do we know the whole truth about a situation that we perceive to be sinful. God knows all the facts; but we don't. We usually assume that we know the whole truth, and we tend to fill in the unknown details with whatever suits our theory best; but what we don't see so well is our own emotional involvement and how that might color our perception, or our feelings of having been offended – “I'm angry because you hurt *me!*” or how that we may be partly to blame for other people's actions. You know how it is: if you're arguing with someone over a perceived offense, you naturally take the stand that “*I'm* one hundred percent right and *you* are one hundred percent wrong.” Now, it's possible that's the case; but let's face it: it's almost never so cut and dried – but still, we act as if it is. And when we do, our anger is anything but just.

A second characteristic of the Lord's anger is that it is slow to kindle. I often hear people going on about how in the Old Testament the Lord is portrayed as a vindictive old grouch who seems to delight in nothing more than punishing people for the slightest offenses. And when I hear them say this, there's one thing I know for certain: they've never actually read the Old Testament. Instead, they've pulled a few verses out of context, or, even more likely, they're simply repeating what they heard from other people who have never read the Bible. If you actually look at the Old Testament, you will see how time and time again the people of God did everything they possibly could to earn the Lord's righteous anger, and how, the Lord displayed incredible patience with them. It was only after showing them amazing forbearance, and calling them back through any number of prophets sent to warn them (prophets that they usually ended up rejecting and killing), and then giving the people ample time to repent and turn from their ways that the Lord *reluctantly* was forced to drop the hammer.

So also, then, our anger – even if it *is* just – should be slow to arouse. But that's not usually the way it is, is it? Instead we're often practically looking for reasons to be upset. It's like we're all radio talk show hosts who have to search hard to find reasons to be furious just so that we work ourselves into a lather and have something impassioned

to say to our audience. It's good for ratings. And too, when dealing with people with whom we've had trouble in the past, we are especially sensitive. With them we're like a mouse trap that just takes the slightest touch to go off. We choose to believe the worst about their motives and interpret their words and actions in the most offensive way, simply to justify being angry with them and to stoke the fire even higher.

A final characteristic of the Lord's wrath is, that as far as this world is concerned, it's quick to dissipate. If compelled by our sin to act in anger, the Lord does; but just as soon as he does, he forgets about it. He holds no grudges, has no long-term feelings of resentment. He, like any parent who truly loves his children, doesn't want to punish them; but knows that he must in order to correct bad behavior and spare them from total ruin. But then it's, "Yes, you made me angry and I spanked you; I did it for your good; but that's not the relationship I want to have with you. I want this to be a relationship of mutual love and respect." God's use of anger is ultimately for restoring broken relationships.

We, on the other hand, usually simmer and stew in the juices of our anger. We don't forgive and forget. We long remember our hurts and seem to take a certain delight in reliving our injuries precisely so that we can remain angry with those who have offended us. And as we let such feelings of anger fester, the infection spreads and spills over to taint other areas of our lives. And it poisons other relationships. My anger at one person may spill over to his family and friends, and it may also pollute my relationship with people who aren't even involved. I'm sure you've known people who seem to be perpetually angry with the entire world. It comes of giving the devil a foothold in your heart by nursing your anger and not letting it go. This is why Paul admonishes us not to let the sun set on our anger. It's in those long hours of the night when you can't sleep because you're upset, and you have nothing to do but think that the deadly sin of wrath sinks in deep. And as Jesus points out in the Gospel lesson we heard, it is nothing less than the sin of murder. It destroys relationships, and possibly leads to acts of violence and revenge – revenge that properly belongs to Lord who judges justly, and never to us.

So in light of all that has been said, I invite you this evening to examine your own heart to determine where and how the sin of wrath has taken root in you. Discovering it, let's confess it to the One who on the cross bore our sin and who endured the wrath of God that we justly deserved. He did it because his love for you was greater than God's anger. And now, having forgiven your sin, he restores you to a proper, loving relationship with the Lord. And in that relationship, he empowers you to forgive and forget – to be free of whatever anger you may hold against someone else – just as he is no longer angry with you for Christ's sake. May God grant it to each of us. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!