

ANGER

(THE SEVEN DEADLY SINS)

PRIDE

ENVY

ANGER

SLOTH – HOPE

GREED – GENEROSITY

GLUTTONY – TEMPERANCE

LUST – LOVE

You see the bottom three sins grouped together. They are the chief sources of our external problems – the sources of our errors and acts against our environment. When we are not in tune with our physical realities – not in harmony with God’s creation and its rightful principles – we move into lust, gluttony, and greed. Each one is quite literally deadly. If we get very deeply into any of these three, we begin to die physically, mentally, and spiritually. The deeper we get into any of the Seven Deadly Sins, the more rapidly we move toward death.

The Seven Deadly Sins represent secular power, and the Seven Lively Virtues represent spiritual power. But language, as ever, is troublesome. Love is the counterpart to lust. But it is not the high *agape* (charity) of the King James Bible. (My, have we wrecked the word “charity.”) This love which is the counterpoint virtue to lust is deep and affectionate caring. We do not use those we truly care about as objects for our own gratification or as tools in our striving for power.

Temperance may be a cut-down version of a higher spiritual virtue called patience, but few remember anymore what temperance once implied. Likewise, generosity is a bit anemic for the “righteousness,” almsgiving, *tsedaqah* that stood opposite greed for the ancients. We neither like nor understand the word “sacrifice” in our time, but that brings the contrast into clear relief: to be greedy, or to be a living sacrifice.

The middle cluster of sins is the source of our most grievous internal problems. The focus has changed from that which we want (or think we want) from the environment outside of us, to that which

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is going on inside of us, in the interior life. In one sense, of course, all our battles are interior battles. But if I am caught in lust, my attention is focused on some outer object I want control over.

I spend too little time talking about the Seven Lively Virtues. You cannot do everything at once, or at least I cannot. So I mention them, and I even thought it would be fun for you to try to figure out which virtue matches which sin. Like, who would have thought that hope was the counterpart to sloth? (Remember also that there is a variation of depression that is ignorance, especially spiritual ignorance. And the classic counterpart virtue to that is wisdom – *sophia*.)

Up at the top, stands pride. It is the chief and king of all the sins. And its counterpart is queen of all the virtues. But we still have a few surprises coming before we get to them.

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We come today to anger (*ira*, ire). Anger is frequently thought of as being directed at something outside of us. So why is it not listed among the three sins in the bottom group? We know, even as we start to ask the question, that this is not the crux of it. Anger is an inside job. Outside things *trigger* anger, but it is always there, waiting to be triggered. Some of us have put locks and shields and alarms all around our anger, shutting down our energy to almost zero, just to protect against a possible outbreak of anger. Nevertheless, it smolders beneath the surface.

What can we say about a subject so vast? First of all, anger is a Deadly Sin. Violence destroys, and the more violent it becomes, the more destructive it becomes. The destructiveness of outer-directed anger is plain enough. Whether physical damage or verbal damage is done, the intent of anger is to kill something – to bring something to an end. Usually, of course, we do not want to kill a whole person; we just want to kill part of them – some way they are thinking; some way they are talking; some way they are behaving. The same is true of groups and nations. But where is the anger coming from?

As I have mentioned several times, each of the Seven Deadly Sins is connected to our survival patterns. With anger, that connection reaches its apex. It is hard to imagine that our species would or could have survived apart from its capacity for anger. We are a violent and

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aggressive species. If we worry now that our violence may destroy us, surely we can see that without violence, we would have perished long ago, before we even got started. If we lost all our violence this very afternoon, how long would we survive as a species? A few months at the most.

We travel around in explosion machines. We eat things that have been killed or reaped. Even in the quiet delicacy of our private dining rooms, we spear and cut our food. More-gentle cultures are appalled by the savagery of our eating customs. Our schedules are violent, speedy – rushing everything too fast for digestion or comprehension or compassion. Everything we touch we try to change, usually by force, firepower, or violence. We are a violent people, and we survive by means of violence.

What is the dividing line, then, between a reasonable aggressiveness and the anger we call a Deadly Sin? Nobody has ever been able to figure it out. There are no clear, tidy definitions or descriptions. Some violent acts are against the law most of the time in most circumstances, except of course when the law of the country requires that we perform them. It is hard to talk about anger for very long without starting to get angry. Anger breeds anger. Anger is contagious. All of us have mountains of it we do not know what to do with, and it just sits around inside of us waiting to get hooked.

Moreover, the familiar principle applies: The more we allow our anger to surface, the more it grows and the more often it surfaces – until soon we have no control over it. It runs and rules us, coming and going at will.

In times of danger, our survival patterns boil down to variations on two themes: fight or flight. If either one does not work, we can sometimes try submission. Each of us retains whatever methods have worked best in the past. If angry behavior works for us, we tend to keep using it. But I suspect all of us have a considerable store of anger within us that we do not want and do not find useful. More than that, we know it is eating away at important parts of our souls. We wish we could get rid of it or learn to handle it better. Even if sometimes it has served us well, we do not trust it or like it. We feel miserable and unhappy when it grows, and we feel wonderful when it begins to dissipate.

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In the endless struggle to understand words, it is interesting that “temper” means to strengthen or toughen. Temper was once used to mean calmness, composure. More accurately, in medieval times it was the mixture within a person of the four humors (sanguine, phlegmatic, choleric, and melancholy). To temper something was to add a substance or agent to alter or modify it – in order to strengthen it or bring it into better balance. To get rid of anger was not an option. To temper it was the aim and hope. Temper was seen to be something like character. Temper was the way we controlled our anger, from which came folk-sayings like: “Your temper is one of your most valuable possessions; don’t lose it.”

Jesus was often angry, not just the time in the temple with the whip. Some of the exchanges between Jesus and the Pharisees were scorching and unsurpassed for verbal violence. (Matthew 23) Jesus was sometimes angry with His disciples, not just impatient or frustrated. “*Get thee behind me, Satan*” is no term of endearment in any language. (Mark 8:33)

As the Scripture readings have already pointed out, Christianity has never assumed we could live without anger. It has assumed that we must constantly reconcile, continually looking for ways to forgive and renew. Nevertheless, did Jesus ever capitulate before the authorities of His time? Did any of His disciples stop all the trouble and consternation they were causing, deserting their beliefs or their efforts to spread them? Did Paul back away from the disputes and terrible anger he was causing?

Anger is found in, from, and between Christians all throughout the New Testament. It is eerie to realize that Mark, who wrote our Gospel, and Paul, the great apostle, could hardly stand the sight of each other through most of the formative years of the church. Clearly both loved Jesus, loved His church, and lived as well as they could for Him, but they could not stand each other’s company. Eventually, it appears that they *did* learn to speak to each other.

Anger is a killer, but we cannot avoid it. We cannot survive without it, and none of our best heroes, not even Jesus, show us a life without it. You might remind me that, on the Cross, Jesus lived beyond His anger and forgave the very people who were killing Him. I would tell you that truly impresses me; in ways, it even breaks my heart – breaks it open to let a little light and love in. Eventually, that action gets to us on another level, too. Aware of the way Jesus puts up

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with me and does not give up on me, I am sometimes moved to put up with others and not give up on them. Truly that is part of the dynamism and beauty of our Faith. It does not change the fact, however, that Jesus was angry enough to stand His ground, to force the issue, and to leave His opponents with no option except to acknowledge His leadership or destroy Him.

So what can we do with anger? We do *not* try to get rid of it! We *do* try to temper it, to be in control, to let the energy of our anger burn to serve God rather than burn to destroy our enemies.

What can be said about anger that is helpful on a practical level? The Seven Deadly Sins are the toughest enemies we encounter, and we are getting up toward the top of the list. So if I (or anybody else) make it sound simple, as if you can learn one trick and have it down pat for life – well, just walk on by.

What are some of the things we do know, large and small, about anger?

The easiest way to get rid of anger is to stop caring. If I don't care who wins the basketball game, I don't get upset, no matter what happens. In fact, I don't *know* what happens, because I don't care and so I do not watch. That works on any level. The easiest way to avoid anger is to stop caring. The trouble is, that's the definition of sloth. All we have to do is let the fourth Deadly Sin kill our souls, and we do not have to worry about the fifth one. Terrific.

Notice the hidden hint: Anger comes from caring. We want to preserve something; we want something to happen; we want to bring some benefit to somebody, somewhere – and so we start caring. Then if anything threatens the good we wanted or hoped for, we get angry. All anger comes from caring.

Getting enough sleep helps us to have a better temper. Our anger is in better balance.

Exercise is also helpful. The anger level is not so close to the surface if we work out on a regular basis. In fact, even in the midst of anger, a good run can often be very beneficial.

Food makes a big difference in our anger level. Peaceful food, prepared lovingly and eaten without haste, does much to help us with anger, especially if we eat in this manner on a regular basis.

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Time each morning to pray, meditate, get our bearings, remember who we are and what we are about – time to reestablish our submission to God, and our desire for the presence of the Holy Spirit – is tremendously helpful with anger. In fact, it cuts out the part of anger that we think of as sin.

Becoming overextended, being too busy, saying yes when we should have said no, feeling guilty, not standing up for ourselves – all these and many more like them raise our anger level and make us increasingly violent.

The most helpful thing I know about dealing with anger is the realization that it comes when something or someone is threatening me. Usually I am not conscious of what the threat is at the time. It may be quite subtle. If you do not like something I am saying from the pulpit, my psyche can track that pretty quickly to starvation. Maybe you only wanted to add an interesting thought or experience; I am angry because you have threatened to kill me.

It sounds as silly to me as it does to you, but the mechanisms of anger are firing all around us and in us every day, in just this way. If I want to do something about my anger, I have the hard task of tracking down the threat that is causing my anger. If I can discover what is being threatened and admit what I am afraid of, then I can take my fear in to confront my faith. If I can get that far, I have it! The anger is under control without being repressed. The sin part – the deadly part – is gone.

In the presence of God and in the awareness of Christ's love, all fears melt down to size. Trust in God brings it back into balance. I still may not like what's happening or what I think *might* happen, but trust takes the fear back down to size. When the fear is reduced, the anger automatically drops with it.

On the practical level, that's the best I know so far. Track the anger to the threat: What am I afraid of? Then take the fear back to faith – to trust in God. That is why the counterpart virtue for anger is faith. Faith is trust. I trust God, in Jesus Christ, to love me forever. Why such love from such a ONE, God only knows; I surely do not. What I do know is that no anger can stand against that faith, because no threat is very serious in the light of God's love. I also suspect there is no other kind of help for true anger.