

“THE SEVEN DEADLY SINS” ANGER

This morning we come to the fourth of the seven deadly sins – the sin of anger. One of the most fascinating people in history is Alexander the Great. Not many people have the word “great” after their name, but from an earthly viewpoint it was an appropriate title given how much he accomplished in such a short period of time. By the age of 33 Alexander had conquered the world – not a bad thing to have on your resume – but his life was cut short at age 33 due in large part to his fierce temper.

Alexander grew up in Greece hearing stories of how Persia conquered his people, and when he became king of Greece at age 19, he determined to get revenge on the Persians. On two occasions, he gave orders to massacre innocent people in towns simply because anger and revenge got the best of him.

One night a general in his army, and his friend from childhood named Cletus, got drunk and ridiculed Alexander in front of his men. In a flash, Alexander grabbed a spear from the hand of a soldier and hurled it at Cletus and killed him. Alexander was immediately remorseful and tried to take his own life with the same spear, but his men stopped him. To relieve his guilt, Alexander took to drinking, and after a drunken party, he caught a fever. For days he laid in bed calling out for his friend and berating himself for being a murderer. He never recovered and died at age 33. Alexander conquered the world, but he could not conquer himself.

Few of us vent our anger to this degree or with such terrible consequences, yet all of us face the challenge of controlling our anger. Thomas Jefferson worked out a way to handle his anger... He said, “When angry, count to ten before you speak. If very angry, count to a hundred.” Mark Twain later revised Jefferson’s words and wrote, “When angry, count to four, when very angry, swear.” Today’s message speaks to all of us. You may not think of yourself as an angry person, but it’s there – it just might be expressed in a different way. Today we want to see from God’s Word what anger is and how we can control it in a Christ-like way.

There are three things we need to understand about anger before we talk about how to control it. Number one, we need to understand that **anger is a God-given emotion**. Some people, we say, are “emotional” because they wear their feelings on their sleeve – they can’t hide it. If they’re worried, you know it. If they’re afraid, you know it. If they’re mad, you know it. Some hide their emotions, but still feel emotions all the same – and without emotions we wouldn’t be truly alive – we’d be robots. We’d watch a beautiful sunset and be unmoved. We’d catch a fish and not be excited. We’d lose a loved one and not feel sad. We’d see someone hurting and not reach out in compassion. We’d see a child being abused and feel no anger.

Emotions are wonderful gifts from God, and one of the primary emotions we feel is anger. There’s something inhuman about a person who never gets angry. One of the reasons God gives us emotions is to provide the energy and passion and motivation to act. When Michael Jordan was at the peak of his career, another player was asked how to stop Michael Jordan, and he said, “Don’t make him mad.” Jordan was legendary for using perceived slights – some little thing someone would say about him – and using that emotion to give him an extra edge.

Anger can be appropriate or it can be sinful. Ephesians 4:26 says, “*Be angry and sin not.*” The Bible actually commands us to be angry, but to be angry in a way that does not lead to sin. Anger is appropriate and good when you see a child being abused, or you see someone getting picked on, or you see someone get away with a crime. Some call this “righteous anger,” and righteous anger is getting angry at the right things – the things that make God angry.

In the Old Testament God is characterized as being “slow to anger” and “abundant in mercy.” God is very patient and longsuffering. But He’s also holy, and being holy He cannot tolerate sin. When the children of Israel built the golden calf and worshipped it in place of God, it says that God “burned with anger.” God is not passionless, impersonal being with no emotions or feelings, but has righteous anger when His holiness is dishonored and His righteous laws are violated. God’s anger is not like a child who doesn’t get his way, stomps His feet, and throws a fit – it’s always an appropriate emotion – a justified anger based on who He is.

Moses felt the same righteous anger when he came down off the mountain and saw the people dancing like pagans around the golden calf. Like God, he burned with anger, and he took the tablets of stone and broke them in two, ground them into powder, put them in water, and made the people drink them! His anger was directed at what made God angry.

When Jesus entered the temple and saw corrupt moneychangers ripping people off, He got angry. He flipped over their tables, scattered their money onto the floor, and drove them out of the temple. Jesus was angry at what made His Father angry.

God says “Be angry” – be angry at what makes me angry. But He also says “and sin not.” Because we’re fallen and we’re human, even righteous anger can become sinful. We can be so mad about the wrong people do, that we hate the person who does them. In our zeal, even our motivations for righteous anger may not always be pure. Anger is like fire – if it’s built in the fireplace, it keeps you warm – if it’s built on the living room floor, it will burn the house down.

There is appropriate anger, but at what point does anger become sin? Anger becomes sinful when our motivation for getting angry is not righteous, and our ways of expressing anger is destructive.

Like the other seven deadly sins, anger is a sin that comes from deep inside us, and we have to pay attention to where it’s coming from. Proverbs 20:5 says, “The purposes of a person’s heart are deep waters, but one who has insight draws them out.” Years ago, I remember hearing Larry Crabb, a Christian psychologist, talk about how our lives are like an iceberg. There is the tip of the iceberg sticking out of the water that everyone can see, and then there’s a whole chunk of the iceberg beneath the surface of the water that is hidden from sight. The visible tip of the iceberg represents the parts of our lives that everyone can see – what we do, what we say, how we treat people – it represents various emotions we express such as anger or frustration, happiness or sadness. The big mass of iceberg below the water represents the unseen part of our lives – the motives and attitudes and desires of the heart. Whatever is in the heart will eventually come bubbling up to the surface.

Where does anger come from? What’s going on below the surface that triggers a sinful form of anger? One of the main triggers is **hurt feelings**. Hurt and anger almost always go together. As the old saying goes, “Hurt people hurt people.” Somebody makes a comment about you – about your looks or your personality or your abilities – and immediately an emotion rises within you. You’re hurt, you’re offended, you take it personally – and you get angry.

I asked Sharla this week to name the top three times she remembers being angry, and each of them revolved around feeling disrespected. As I thought about my top three times, mine too were about feeling disrespected. Nothing makes a parent's blood boil more than your kid disrespecting you. How dare you talk to me that way! Go to your room and don't come out for three weeks. How about when you're driving along the highway and someone rudely cuts you off? How dare they treat me that way! Or when you express a political opinion on a current topic of the day, and someone cancels you. Disrespect is a big trigger. When we're hurt, our human nature is to lash out and get revenge – to hurt the other person like they hurt me.

Another trigger that brings on anger is **frustration** – you're moving toward a goal – you're trying to get somewhere or get something done, and someone or something blocks your goal. You're trying to get to an appointment and a car pulls out in front of you and precede to go 40 miles per hour except when they get to a straight-away when you can finally pass them – then they speed up. You're standing in line at a store, hoping you picked the right line, and the person right in front has a credit card that won't go through. You're in a restaurant waiting for your food to be served and the group that came in after you get served first. You enjoy being active and an illness or injury prevents you from doing what you enjoy. As the frustration level goes up, the potential for anger goes up.

Unfairness is another motivation for anger. When the prodigal son returned home, his father threw his arms around him and gave him a party. The older brother said, "What about me? I was the good son who played by all the rules, while little brother went out and blew his inheritance. How come I never got a party?"

Jealousy can arouse anger. When Cain saw God accept Abel's offering and not his, he got angry and killed his brother. When Saul heard the women of Israel praise David more than him, an evil spirit took over Saul and he tried to kill David.

Anger is often a secondary emotion of something deeper going on below the surface, and it's important to identify the source of anger before it rises to the surface and is expressed in a destructive way. Proverbs 29:22 says, "An angry person stirs up dissension, and a hot-tempered person commits many sins." The Hebrew word for angry means "flared nostrils." When a person gets really mad, they put on an angry face – their eyes get wide, their veins bulge, their face gets red, their eyebrows come together, their teeth are clinched, and this causes their nose to open wide.

Proverbs 30:33 says, "For as churning the milk produces butter, and as twisting the nose produces blood, so stirring up anger produces strife." This Proverb gives us two images of anger – the churning of milk to produce butter, and the person who walks up to another person and twists their nose until it bleeds. Some of you grew up with brothers or sisters who did that to you when you were young. In the same way, anger stirs up strife and conflict.

It's easy to read these verses and think, "I'm not an angry person. I get frustrated, I get irritated now and then, but my nostrils don't flare and I don't twist somebody's nose." But all of us feel the emotion of anger – we just express it in different ways.

One way of expressing anger is what we can call the **spewer**. The spewer aggressively unloads their anger instantly. Somebody sets them off, and their anger goes from zero to 70 in a flash. You don't have to guess how they feel – they're happy to let you know.

The spewer sometimes expresses anger physically – they pound their fist on the table, they punch a hole in the wall, they throw something across the room, they slam the door. They’re the kind of person you read about in road rage incidents. Someone cuts them off and they use their car as a weapon to intimidate and threaten. Spewers also use their words as a weapon – they yell, they curse, they threaten, they speak bluntly, they say things in the heat of the moment that they later regret.

Some of you might remember Woody Hayes, who coached the Ohio State Buckeye football team in the ‘60s and ‘70s. He was a legendary coach who won five national championships. But he abruptly coached his last game in 1978 when an opposing player intercepted a pass and was tackled out of bounds a few feet away from Woody Hayes. When the player got up, Hayes punched him in the throat and was fired. One fit of anger cost him his career and reputation.

You might not be a spewer, but a **stuffer**. Stuffers believe that all anger is sin, and when angry feelings start to come to the surface, they shove it back down. But instead of the anger disappearing, it festers. Like a crockpot, it simmers on slow heat. If their anger is not released, it grows inside in the form of bitterness and depression. It also affects them physically by way of migraine headaches and panic attacks and high blood pressure and ulcers.

Sometimes a person with suppressed anger suddenly explodes in a way that shocks everyone, including themselves. Sharla and I took a road trip some years ago after the death of our baby, to get away and clear our head, and one evening I was checking into a motel and gave the clerk a coupon I had for a reduced rate. The clerk matter-of-factly told me that the coupon no longer applied – it had something to do with reading the fine print. My nostrils immediately began to flare. “What do you mean, it’s no longer valid – look right there” – and I pointed to the date and details. I got really angry – angry for me – and took it out on this poor clerk. What was really happening had nothing to do with the coupon – I had unresolved anger over the death of our child, and the coupon was simply the breaking point. After that, I wasn’t allowed to check us into motels the rest of the trip.

You might not be a spewer or a stuffer, but a **leaker**. This anger of this kind of person leaks out here and there – not directly, but indirectly. If someone asks them if they’re angry, they say, “No, I’m fine. I’m not angry,” but without realizing it, their anger leaks out passively. If they’re mad at someone, they don’t confront them – they don’t like confrontation – but they get back at people in passive ways. They give them the silent treatment, they talk about them behind their back, they give little verbal jabs – hiding behind humor, they show up late for a meeting, they try to sabotage the plans of a group. Their anger slowly leaks out through passive aggression.

Each of these ways of expressing anger is destructive, and each is sinful because it does not deal with anger in a Christ-like, redemptive way. How then do we handle our anger the right and appropriate way? God’s Word tells us five things we must do to control anger.

Number one, **yield your anger to the control of the Holy Spirit**. Ephesians 4:30-31 says, “And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice.” The key to controlling anger, or any of the seven deadly sins, is relying on the power of the Holy Spirit. When you become a Christian, you become a new person and you have a new power you didn’t have before. The Holy Spirit of God comes into your life and fills you with His presence and control.

Every day you have a choice – do you allow the impulses of the flesh to control you – like anger – or do you allow the Holy Spirit of God to control you. The Apostle Paul uses the analogy of alcohol when he says, “Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit” (Ephesians 5:18). It’s a matter of control – are you controlled by wine or by anger – or are you controlled by the Spirit. In order to get victory over anger, you must have a daily walk with the Lord – you must slow down and be with Him and be aware of what is going on beneath the surface. Otherwise, you’ll be caught off guard in the heat of the moment and respond in the flesh.

Secondly, **we must release anger appropriately**. Anger must be released, or it will destroy us and everyone around us. If you’re a spewer, Thomas Jefferson’s advice to count to ten is very appropriate. You want to release anger, but not in a way that is destructive and that you’ll later regret. You need to have a game plan ahead of time of how you will handle hurt feelings or disrespect or frustration. Know ahead of time what triggers you. When things get heated, take a walk and cool down. Never try to solve a problem when you’re angry – taking a few minutes to calm allows time for the temperature to come down.

If you’re a stuffer, it’s vital that you release anger so that it doesn’t eat you up. You need to be aware of your anger and get it out. Tell the Lord that you’re angry. Talk to someone about your feelings. You can do what Abraham Lincoln did when he was angry – he would write a letter to the person he was angry at and pour all of his anger into his letter, and then after he calmed down, he’d throw the letter away. This is good advice in the age of the internet where people write an angry thought and press “send.” It’s important to get anger out, but in a way that is not hurtful or destructive.

If you’re a leaker, you also need to be aware of your anger and recognize the passive ways in which your anger leaks out. You need to bring your anger before the Lord and let it go. As Proverbs 19:11 says, “It is to a one’s glory to overlook an offense.” You swallow your pride and say, “I don’t like what that person did, but I can overlook it. I don’t have to stew about it, and I don’t have to waste valuable time and energy seeking revenge or retaliation. You show grace to people just as God showed you grace to you. If the offense is something you can’t let go on, don’t resort to passive aggression, but confront the other person in love, seeking not to condemn but to understand. The ultimate release of anger is forgiveness – giving your hurt to God and entrusting judgment to Him.

The third way we control anger is to **give anger an expiration date**. Ephesians 4:26 says, “Do not let the sun go down on your wrath.” In biblical times, the setting of the sun was the closing of the day and the beginning of the next. By the end of the day, make sure your anger is diffused. Don’t hang on to your anger or allow it to fester in your heart. We need to take this literally. If there’s a disagreement with someone, clear it up by evening. When you lay your head on your pillow, make sure those feelings of anger have been resolved. This is especially true in marriage. Don’t go to sleep back-to-back. Don’t let anger simmer, but take care of it as soon as possible.

Fourth, **diffuse your anger with gentle words**. Proverbs 15:1 says, “A gentle answer turns away wrath but a harsh word stirs up anger.” The word “gentle” means strength under control. When we get mad, our words can turn harsh. We overstate the situation and use words like “you always do that” “you never do this.” Spewers use words as a weapon to cut others down and intimidate them. Jesus said that we can murder others with our words – words may not kill the body, but they kill the soul.

The last year and a half, with all the problems going on in culture, the level of anger has risen dramatically, and along with that anger has come a barrage of four-letter words. If you're mad at someone, you just tell them off, you cut them down and diminish them. Jesus said when you do this you've committed murder in your heart and God will hold you accountable. As Christians, God gives us a new vocabulary – He gives us words that build up and encourage and fosters love.

Fifth, we can go a long way in preventing inappropriate anger by **developing the spiritual fruit of patience**. Proverbs 15:18 says, "A hot tempered person stirs up dissension, but a patient person calms a quarrel." Anger brings strife and tension in relationships, but patience brings calm and peace. The Hebrew word for "patience" or "slow to anger" literally means "long of nose." If anger makes a person's nostrils flare and burn hot, the person who is "long of nose" means that it takes a lot to make their nose get hot. They will be slow to anger.

In the New Testament, patience is a fruit of the Spirit that responds to hurt feelings and disrespect and frustration in a calm manner that is slow to get angry. The Greek word for patience means "to bear up or endure." When someone or something tries your patience, you have a long fuse that doesn't detonate quickly. Patience is the attitude that decides ahead of time how you will respond if you get cut off in traffic or a motel clerk won't accept your coupon, or your best friend ridicules you in front of others.

Anger is often tied to the sin of pride, where we expect the world to revolve around us, and for everyone else to move out of our way and cooperate with our agenda. But patience looks not to our own interests, but the interests of others. Instead of getting angry, we give people the benefit of the doubt, we seek to understand what is going on in their lives, and love them as Christ loves us. Being patient means that we don't take things so personally, that we are not quick to be offended, and that we leave things up to God rather than seek revenge.

As I was thinking ahead on this series on the seven deadly sins, I noted that the message on anger fell on communion Sunday. What does anger have to do with the Lord's Table, I wondered. The more I thought about it, the Lord brought that Jesus' death on the cross appeased God's anger towards our sin. The book of Romans teaches that all of us have fallen short of God's glory and deserving of eternal condemnation. Because God is holy, our sins have separated us from God, and we are under the heavy hand of God's wrath. But in His grace and mercy, God provided a way for us to be reconciled to Him and to be released from His wrath and judgment. That way was the cross. On the cross all of God's wrath against your sin and my sin was poured out on His Son, who bore our sins in His body. By trusting in Jesus as your Savior from sin, you are no longer under God's wrath because Jesus took the wrath intended for us upon Himself. This is what the gospel is all about – being right with God is not something I do, but it's about what Christ did for me and putting all my trust in Him.

Communion is a time to remember and reflect on the cross and the fact that because of Jesus we are free from judgment and free to live full, abundant lives. And because God withholds His anger towards us, we are obligated to release our anger towards others and forgive just as we have been forgiven.