

Seven Deadly Sins and their Remedies

Lenten reflections for 2018

This week, we consider Wrath (Latin, *ira*; think Dies Irae, “Day of Wrath”), or *Anger*. We also consider its blessed spiritual antidote, **Meekness/Gentleness**; the refusal to do harm to others; peacemaking.

What do we mean when we speak of sinful, unhelpful, destructive anger? **Wikipedia** gives us these synonyms and behaviors: “Wrath often reveals itself in the wish to seek vengeance. In its purest form, wrath presents with injury, violence, and hate that may provoke feuds that can go on for centuries. Wrath may persist long after the person who did another a grievous wrong is dead. Feelings of wrath can manifest in different ways, including impatience, hateful misanthropy, revenge, and self-destructive behavior, such as drug abuse or suicide.”

The epistle of James warns us: “Let every one be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry, **for man’s anger does not bring about the righteousness God desires.**”

The New Testament commentator, William Barclay, gives us this nice description. “The Christian must put off anger and temper. The two words are *orge* and *thumos* [from which we get our English word, *thermal*], and the difference between them is this. *Thumos* is a blaze of sudden anger which is quickly kindled and just as quickly dies. The Greeks likened it to a fire amongst straw, which quickly blazed and just as quickly burned itself out. *Orge* is anger which has become inveterate; it is long-lasting, slow-burning anger, which refuses to be pacified and nurses its wrath to keep it warm. For the Christian the burst of temper and the long-lasting anger are alike forbidden.”

Will Rogers gives us this pithy maxim: “People who fly into a rage always make a bad landing.”

Every one of us is acquainted with the natural reflexes of anger. Most of us can relate to the momentary lost temper. We are also acquainted with the simmering resentment that rehearses the memory of an injury. We nurture the grievance until it overtakes our minds and emotions, making us a captive of a bad moment in our past. For those of us who defend this behavior as “only natural,” we are well-reminded of the supernatural power of the spiritual life with God. Being people of faith--spiritual people--makes us more than creatures of flesh, blood, and natural passions. Life in the Spirit enables and directs us to self-mastery, overcoming what is merely natural.

Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Doesn’t that turn the world’s assumptions upside down? We look at the original Greek word translated “meek,” “humble,” or “gentle”: *praus*. Again, here is William Barclay’s exploration of this term. “It is the regular word for an animal which has been domesticated, which has been trained to obey the word of command, which has learned to answer to the reins. It is the word for an animal which has learned to accept control. So a possible translation of this beatitude is: ‘Blessed is the man who has every instinct, every impulse, every passion under control. Blessed is the man who is entirely self-controlled.’ The moment we have stated that, we see that it needs a change. It is not so much the blessing of the man who is self-controlled, for such complete self-control is beyond human capacity; rather, it is the blessing of the man who is completely God-controlled, for only in his service do we find our perfect freedom, and in doing his will our peace.”

The meek, then, are those “with their passions, and instincts, and impulses under discipline.”

Barclay gives us this contrasting image: “It was the lack of that very quality which ruined Alexander the Great, who, in a fit of uncontrolled temper in the middle of a drunken debauch, hurled a spear at his best friend and killed him. No man can lead others until he has mastered himself; no man can serve others until he has subjected himself; no man can be in control of others until he has learned to control himself. But the man who gives himself into the complete control of God will gain this meekness which will indeed enable him to inherit the earth.”

He then gives us this expanded paraphrase of the beatitude. (We rightly understand it to apply equally to women as to men.) “O the bliss of the man who is always angry at the right time and never angry at the wrong time, who has every instinct, and impulse, and passion under control because he himself is God-controlled, who has the humility to realise his own ignorance and his own weakness, for such a man is a king among men!”

Our homework on this challenge:

When raising young children, parents discover that unbridled fury and temper tantrums arise pretty spontaneously. (Maybe in the parents as well as in the children.) If we don’t want to affirm those “hot tempered” explosions, and if we hope to coach all in the family to moderate our own natural feelings, how shall we do this?

Simply ignoring the meltdowns may imply that these behaviors are harmless and permissible. Have we added, “no,” and “unacceptable” to our lexicon of child rearing and parenting terms?

Can we coach our children to see that natural feelings are one thing, and that hurtful expressions are another?

Staying angry in a resentful, brooding disposition is a sure toxin in our souls and in our relationships. Forgiving a transgression, injury, or debt is a spiritually disciplined response, meant to free and heal us. The meaning of the Greek word, *aphiemi*, is to set free, or to release from one’s grasp. My own success in forgiveness almost always entails releasing a person from my judgment of their aggravating behavior into God’s handling of the matter. I don’t pretend that the injury didn’t happen. I leave it in God’s hands to resolve, judge or pardon.

A corollary to forgiving, as a method of getting free from anger: ***forgiving someone does not mean that I must trust them***, as though nothing happened. Trust is conferred upon those who are worthy of that gift, to those who have earned it by their sincere decency. Wisdom may entail forgiveness and distance, to avoid becoming again the victim of another’s bad or hurtful behavior.

True confession: I became a better husband and father when my family helped me to see an important truth. What I experienced as ***urgency*** in my raised voice, my family experienced as menacing, frightening anger toward them. (The same could be said about those who go silent and withdraw when they are upset.) I resolved that I had to learn to check the rising “heat” of my anger ***before it was expressed*** to family members in loud, hostile ways. With a little counseling, family teamwork, sincere prayer, and the season of lent to practice a new way of managing my feelings, we took a big step forward in my self-control and in family harmony.

How about a heart-to-heart conversation with someone you know who seems to have mastered this challenge? Someone who seems seldom, or never, to be overtaken by anger? Ask them how they do it.