

Many members. One body united in Christ.

Midweek Vespers - Wrath
St. Matthew 5:21-24, 38-48
25 March, Anno Domini 2026

Saints of God,

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Tonight we consider the deadly sin of wrath or anger. Anger is rather unique among the deadly sins in that it isn't always sin. Whereas there is no good way to be gluttonous or envious or lustful, there are times when anger is proper and good. Understanding this helps us to identify and confess the anger that is sinful and deadly.

The best place to start is to consider the one place where anger is good and true - God. Scripture is filled with references to God's anger. God's anger can never be sinful because He is a just and holy and righteous God. One challenge that we face in understanding how God can be good AND angry is that we associate anger with violent, often uncontrolled, outbursts of emotion directed at either a real or perceived slight against us.

That is not what holy anger in God is. God's anger is not driven by His ego or self-protection. It is driven by His pure and perfect love of truth and life and justice. That perfect love is complemented by a perfect hatred of everything that is contrary to truth and life. And God's anger is under His absolute control, serving His good and gracious will. Countless times throughout Scripture God declares Himself to be "merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love." Nor is God's anger driven by fear of personal loss or injury, even when He wrapped Himself in human flesh and suffered terrible injustices, hunger, and pain just as you and I know these things. God's wrath is wedded to His perfect patience which passed over former iniquities in order to show His righteousness. (Romans 3:25-26)

Do not lose sight of the fact, however, that God does have anger. He has a perfect hatred of sin and death with all their fruits and consequences. And we are to fear God's wrath, as Dr. Luther reminds us in the Close of the Commandments, wrath which punishes the children for the sins of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate God. (Exodus 20:5) Throughout Holy Scripture we are shown countless examples of those who took God's wrath against sin lightly and

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then found out that it was absolutely serious. To name only a few - all of humanity that were destroyed in the Flood, Pharaoh who persisted in his rejection of God's Word, the wicked of Sodom and Gomorrah, Nadab and Abihu who arrogantly thought to worship God differently than He commanded, the kingdoms of Israel and Judah against whom God sent the Assyrians and the Babylonians to exile them for their worship of false gods, the Jews who were crushed under the Romans in AD 70 because they had rejected their Savior.

And, of course, there is no clearer view of God's wrath than His sinless Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, hanging from the cross, crying out "My God, My God! Why have You forsaken Me!" while His Father turned away from Him. In that hour Jesus knew no goodness and no mercy. Every ounce of God's righteous and just wrath against our sin was poured out on Jesus because He was the Lamb of God who had been appointed to take away our sin. He who knew no sin became sin for us and so became the sole recipient of the fullness of God's holy anger. Jesus became the only idolater, rebel, murderer, adulterer, thief, liar, and coveter. Such things cannot stand in the presence of God's holiness because they are unholy, impure, and contrary to the perfect truth and life and goodness of God.

And it is in precisely that moment, the roasting of the true Passover Lamb in the fire of God's wrath, that we see the purest picture of what holy wrath is and does. Did God in His rightful anger against your sin blot you out? Did He turn His face away from you? Did He give you your just desserts? Did He cut Himself off from you and refuse to have anything to do with you and make sure that everyone else knew just how terrible you were? No. That's what sinners do. God's anger, instead of driving Him away from us, drove Him even closer to us so that we wouldn't have to suffer the temporal and eternal punishment that we deserve. Instead of making us bear a weight that would crush us God suffered His own wrath and judgment in our place. Rather than nursing His wrath into a hatred of you and a desire for your suffering and damnation, He aimed His wrath at reconciling Himself to you through the Blood of His beloved Son. He unleashed His holy anger against all of the devil's works, even death itself, so that now even they are forced to serve His gracious will of reconciling sinners in His mercy.

Now, then, let us consider our own anger in light of God's good and right anger. Undoubtedly, people do sin against us and cause us harm of body and mind and goods and reputation. And the works of evil are all around us bringing terrible pain and suffering to friend and foe alike. Like our God, we should hate evil with every fiber of our being. God tells us through the prophet Amos "Hate evil, and love good, and establish justice in the gate." (Amos 5:15) The psalmist writes "Do I not

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hate those who hate you, O LORD? And do I not loathe those who rise up against you? I hate them with complete hatred; I count them my enemies.” (Psalm 139:21-22) Those words sound very harsh but we should be angry when someone is stealing from our neighbor or when someone is tearing down the good reputation of our neighbor. We should be wrathful that millions of our neighbors are being murdered in the wombs of their mothers. We should be filled with anger that women are treated and portrayed as nothing more than objects of men’s perversions, that marriage and children are despised while divorce is big business. We should be utterly indignant that anyone would dare to schedule things on the Lord’s Day which prevent us from standing in God’s merciful presence and being filled with His life-giving Word. And nothing should cause us greater anger than false teachers who pervert the Word of God, leading people to trust in false gods like Allah or emptying Baptism and the Lord’s Supper of the promises of God so that all that is left is an empty shell.

Anger helps indicate when a wrong has been done but what should such holy and righteous anger cause us to do? Certainly not work toward the harm or destruction of our neighbor. Holy anger always moves toward life and truth and reconciliation. Our hatred of all evil should drive us to protect our neighbor and set him free from the devil’s clutches so that he too might be reconciled to God in Christ and be spared eternal death. Our anger, like our Father’s, is to be wedded to patience and a love of all that is good and true. Rightly directed anger against evil is a truly powerful force that can bring about great good.

The problem is that more often than not, our anger is not about truth nor about being reconciled to our neighbor. Most often our anger is a selfish and bitter anger that is completely devoid of love and is interested only seeing our neighbor get what he deserves or worse if we can work it out. And that is because we are concerned chiefly with our own glory rather than God’s. We don’t trust that God is good and that He will bring about perfect justice and so we take matters into our own hearts and hands. We are, as Luther rightly says in his explanation of the Fifth Commandment, unwilling to suffer at the hands of others. Our wrath leaps out from our mouths and hands when we are made to suffer slight inconveniences or when we don’t get what we want. We can’t stand the thought of not answering those who make false accusations against us or giving our coat to the one who stole our hat and gloves.

But dear children of the Heavenly Father, this is exactly what you have been freed to do! Precisely because Christ suffered at our hands we have nothing in heaven or on earth to fear nor do we have to get revenge on those who have slighted us or

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even truly harmed us. We can instead direct our anger against that which is actually evil and in such a way that we bring about good. We can work to make sure that the scourge of abortion is stopped and that there is more than enough support for women who feel that they have no other choice but to kill their child. We can stop watching shows, playing games, and listening to music that promote a wicked view of sex and instead read God's Word, pray, and spend time talking and playing with our families. We can and must withhold our money and say no to those who would have us trade gathering with the body of Christ for fun or trophies or wealth. We can and must silence those who speak poorly of others and instead open our mouths to defend our neighbor and build him up.

Praise be to God who has not dealt with us in His anger as we deserve. Instead, He has shown great patience with us because He loves us and desires both our temporal and eternal good. He has provided His great and precious promises to quiet our unholy anger. Read them. Meditate upon them when you have been wronged. And He has poured out the Blood of His Son Jesus Christ which was offered on the cross to satisfy God's divine justice on our behalf. Though you have been filled with unholy anger for which you deserve God's holy anger, He invites you to humbly confess your sins of anger and be forgiven. He invites you to repent of those times when you have taken vengeance into your own hands rather than trusting in Him. He invites you to repent of those times you have been unwilling to be fully reconciled with those who have sinned against you. He invites you to repent of those times when you have turned anger toward revenge and vindictiveness. He invites you to repent of nursing your anger into enduring grudges.

Your Father invites you to repent because He is abounding in steadfast love for you and would have you know the peace and the rest of the forgiveness of all your sins. And He would have you be free of your anger that burns against those who have sinned against you. In your anger, do not sin. Instead, entrust yourself to the hands of Him who died for you and who has suffered all evil so that you may be filled with the eternal goodness of His mercy. Let your anger spur you toward peace. God grant it for Jesus' sake.

In the Name of +Jesus.

Pastor Ulmer

(We stand.) The peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus our Lord.