

*The Seven Deadly Sins 2: Anger*

Matthew 5:21-24

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Our next deadly sin is anger, and boy, do I have a lot of experience with that one these days! In fact, I'd say anger is the deadly sin I struggle with the most. The reason? It's that cute little curly-haired guy you always see me with!

I really do try not to use parenting as a sermon illustration too often. Quite aside from the fact that it's not fair to Sam to stick him in my sermons every week, I also worry that my sermons will get boring. But I'm going to indulge today, because as I said, it's what I know best these days, and it really, REALLY fits with the issue of anger. In fact, I have a theory that God gives us that first year with the cute little infant so we can build up a healthy reserve of love that will see us through the second year! Parenting, I have come to believe, is not so much about me helping Sam to grow up, as it is about me learning to grow up myself.

But first, let's talk briefly about what exactly anger is. I always think of anger as an emotion, a feeling, and I'm of the school of thought that we can't help our feelings. They're neither good nor bad, they just are, and what matters is what we do, not what we feel. But in researching this sermon I came across a discussion of the old Roman philosopher Seneca. Bear with me here for a bit of ancient philosophy! Seneca said that while anger is an emotion, it also contains an element of reason, albeit reason that is misused. He defines anger as "a combination of emotion arisen from painful experience, with a conceptual recognition of the source of the pain, and a decision to follow the impulse to attack that source." The short version is that anger is the "burning desire to pay back pain."

That will to harm is a key point, and it's what lies behind Jesus' famous words in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus, too, sees anger as more than an emotion. It contains a will to harm, and that's why when we are angry with our brother or sister – or toddler! – we are liable to judgment. He equates anger with spiritual murder.

I have to confess that I'm not entirely convinced that anger is not an emotion. It does seem to me that anger can indeed be good, as when we get angry at an injustice. I have read previously that we need to distinguish between "hot" anger and "cold" anger, that the former is what Jesus and Seneca are talking about, something that we must guard against, but that "cold" or dispassionate anger can motivate people to make positive changes in their lives and in the world. But for the sake of this sermon, let's go with Seneca's definition, and I think we will gain some important insights into understanding what is so deadly about anger.

Now let's go back to parenting, and let's start with infancy. A cute little baby, all huge eyes and bald head, a sweet package wrapped in a diaper. Who in the world could ever be angry at an infant? Who could ever want to hurt such a tiny, helpless being? Confession time: I could! If you're a parent, you've been there: the baby wakes up in the middle of the night crying, and nothing you do can get them to stop. This is the third time she's woken up this night, and it's the fourth night in a row. You're frazzled. You're sleep-deprived. You're at your wits' and nerves' end, and you explode in anger. "That's it! Shut up, or I'll give you something to cry about!" I have been there, and if you're a parent, you've been there too. I can totally see how an otherwise good and loving parent could complete lose it and harm a child. Indeed, most child abuse occurs with children under the age of five, from a parent who is stressed and exhausted, not evil.

What's going on here? Using Seneca's definition, we see that the real emotions here are frustration with the crying, anxiety that you don't know what to do, stress that you need more sleep, perhaps fear that there's something seriously wrong with the child and you don't know how to fix it. But Seneca says that what pushes it into anger is when we wrongfully attribute malice to the child's actions, that the infant is somehow willfully trying to cause you harm. I see this all the time in parenting books that warn against infants "manipulating" their parents by crying for them.

But this is absurd. A six-month-old child is not capable of wishing harm on anyone. They don't cry because they're trying to irritate you or keep you from sleeping. They're crying because they feel bad, or they're afraid, or they're overtired, or they're stressed out. The best way for a parent to respond is NOT to get angry. Indeed anger, as I can testify from personal experience, will only make things worse.

Spanking provides an excellent illustration of this. Obviously this is a very controversial issue. I myself am not in favor of spanking, but neither do I think it will necessarily cause irreparable harm to a child. But here's the thing: all spanking advocates agree that it should never be done when the parent is angry. You should be calm and in control when you spank your child. But 99.9% of the time when parents do spank, they do so in anger. That tells me that spanking is really done for the benefit of the parents, and not for the benefit of the child. It's done because the parent is fed up and wishes harm on the child. And it sure doesn't have any positive effect on the child anyway. I can say this, because I've done it myself.

Because this action explodes out of us, we think that it is an emotion, an impulse, something that we can't control. But what we see here in the example of the crying infant is that in fact anger is not an emotion but a habit. It becomes a conditioned response to stress. And boy, do we parents ever get good at it.

The whole irony is that as the child grows older and becomes more of a rational creature, we use that to justify our own anger at them. Sam is a toddler. Toddlers now can use a few words and they can understand even more. They dump the toys out on the floor not to make us angry but because it's fun – especially when Mommy's face turns all purple and she starts jumping up and down and waving her arms! But when I give in to the habit of anger, I think he dumps the toys out to defy me, and his frequent use of that wonderful toddler word, "No!" only adds fuel to my fire.

Or what about elementary age kids? As their language ability increases, so does their ability to talk back and sass. I'm not saying we should let them get away with it, but the kids aren't really doing it to hurt us. If you ever watch "Super Nanny," you see how these kids act out because they crave attention from their busy parents, and negative attention is better than no attention at all. These kids aren't evil or mean or even spoiled, but when we react in the heat of anger, we just make it worse.

And on to those troublesome teenage years, where now the kids are old enough to apply all kinds of logic and reasoning to why they should be allowed to go out wearing those clothes, and how they need the keys to the car, and why they really, really need to get their tongues pierced. Everyone knows teenagers hate their parents, right? It may feel that way, but studies have found that teens actually crave relationship with their parents. It is excruciatingly horrible to be a teenager. They want their parents to set limits, and they want their parents to talk to them. But if we parents think it's all about us, that the kids are doing it on purpose to hurt us, and we react in anger, we just make things that much worse.

And on and on even into adulthood, where we are now thoroughly habituated to anger, and so it is that we think everything our family members or neighbors or coworkers or fellow church members do that annoys us – they must be

doing to hurt us personally. So we get angry, and we wish them harm, and as Jesus would say, we murder them in our hearts.

But anger is not an emotion. It is a habit, and like all habits, we can change it. The antidote to anger, the heavenly virtue that counterbalances it, is patience. Think about that. The antidote is not love, but patience. Taking the time to pause, take a breath, calm ourselves, distance ourselves from the situation, and be able to view it from a truly rational perspective. In parenting language, this is called a time-out, and let me tell you, I put myself into time-out all the time!

Patience means to tolerate our pain, emotions, suffering, as natural, without taking offense or taking it personally. That screaming baby in the crib – it's not about me. The toddler dumping toys on the floor, the 10-year-old experimenting with swear words, the teen-ager sulking in her room – even the jerk who cut me off on the freeway – it's not about me. Who knows what's going on in their lives, in their minds? Their behavior is about them. My behavior is about me. And how will I respond?

Again, we have this example in Jesus. Surely he ought to have taken the crucifixion personally! The Romans and the priests really were out to get him! They meant to hurt him, they meant for him to suffer. How could he not take it personally when one of his own disciples led the authorities to him, when another disciple claimed never to have known him, and all the rest ran away and abandoned him? That was personal, wasn't it? He had every right to be angry! But how did he respond? He prayed and said, "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they're doing." And he was right. All their violence wasn't about him at all. It was about themselves, their own fear and pain, and how they were so deeply trapped in sin, so entangled in this habit of anger. If Jesus had reacted in anger, it wouldn't have solved anything. Instead, he responded with patience, with love, and with forgiveness. And that is why they, and all of us today, are able to be healed of our sin.