



Wrongful Anger: A Deadly Sin

This is how Giotto (1267-1337) depicted Ira, "anger" or "wrath", in 1306. The woman is rending her clothes to expose her breasts, which should be symbols of nourishing mercy. Anger is unnatural, obsessive and violent. The contortions of Anger's face are as if the faces of two different people have been spliced together to make one macabre whole. Anger is a splintering of the integrated human person. It makes of us infernal creatures. Her torso is bent backwards. Although anger appears to be active, it is radically passive: anger comes upon us and robs us of the sovereignty of reason. Our mind is dethroned and we are helpless before our rage.

Anger is an emotion. Here we shall only address the *sin of anger*. Sinful anger is a hostile emotional reaction which is out of proportion to the alleged provocation.

We are not speaking here of the rare cases of righteous anger, which is really anger at sin.

Let us take a clear example of the sin of anger: in the 1960s, paper boys used to come around each Sunday morning selling the newspapers. I recall hearing one morning that a paper boy of about twelve years old had been shot dead after he had admiringly run his fingers over a car as he was walking up the driveway to deliver the papers.

The murderer defended himself on the basis that he had been angry because the boy had no right to touch his car, and he was apprehensive the boy would scratch it. Now, even from an ordinary point of view, although the boy had no right to touch his car, it was a horrific crime, and deserved gaol.

From a Christian perspective, however, the point is that it is a sin: murder of the innocent and the undeserving offends God, who created us all. We have no right to be

unreasonably angry with our brethren, let alone to slay them.

Shooting the paperboy is an extreme example, but the principle is applicable to our day to day lives in the home, at work, in shops, on the street, and so on.

The value of this unusual incident is that it is a sort of microscope: it

enables us to see what we might otherwise miss.

Exactly the same considerations of a temperate response apply when a parent reacts angrily to one of their children with a rage which is disproportionate to what the child has done. Exactly the same considerations arise in "road rage" cases, or when someone on the cash register keeps us waiting because they're chatting, or someone is promoting a value which we disagree with (just consider how much anger is aroused in politics).

Whenever we act we must take account of our duties and our responsibilities, and respond temperately.

A person with reason is responsible for his actions. We are responsible for taking steps to control our anger and to root out the causes of it within ourselves. *And that means consciously shaping our attitudes by thinking thoughts of peace.* This is a duty before God.

"I think thoughts of peace, not of revenge" says the Lord. (Jeremiah 29:11, Vulgate)

We should never forget that we are commanded to love other human beings for the love of God. How much more serious then, is the case of a person who angrily mistreats their own children, parents, brothers and sisters, people whom, even from an ordinary perspective, they should love not only for God's but also for their own sake?

The true cause of the anger lies within – we project it outside of ourselves only in order to wash our hands of the guilt (and this sort of guilt, incidentally, is a good guilt if it leads us to change). What the paperboy had done did not cause the man's anger. *Rather, the propensity to anger was already there within that man, lying dormant as an attitude.* He was already lawless within his own heart. He used his mind and emotions to drown out the voice of his conscience.

Let us consider the family: the children do not cause their parents to get angry, instead, there is something in us which already aught. It is not uncommon to hear parents say how they never meant to get angry, but the child was so badly behaved, and they were so tired, that they could not help themselves. But often the child is five years old or younger. In other words, the parent expects a mere child without the use of mature reason to be able to control themselves, when they, the adult who does have fully developed mind and emotions, cannot control themselves. It is unrealistic to expect a

child to be able to discipline itself in the face of its desires, when an adult cannot do so for the sake of their love of the child for whom they are responsible.

“I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment, whoever says “Raca!” (fool) to his brother will be liable to the council, and whoever calls him a fool will be liable to the hell of fire.” (Matthew 5:22-23)

If an infant is hungry or tired, they cannot articulately present their requests, and they do not even understand that they are tired, they just feel unsettled. Nature makes children so that they get attention by crying, and us so that we want to take measures to stop it. But what measures will we take?

Two people hear the same crying: one gets angry, and the other becomes compassionate. They each want the crying to stop, but one hears noise, and the other does something constructive to help the child.

Besides, the practical reality is that we raise the children by example more than any other way. If we get angry with them, we are in fact teaching them that they are justified in getting angry when frustrated.

We cannot consider every possible case of anger here, but the point is that wrongful anger is never the right response: it always based on false expectations and unrealistic demands.

The Sermon on the Mount

In the Sermon on the Mount, Our Lord taught: “I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment, whoever says “Raca!” (fool) to his brother will be liable to the council, and whoever calls him a fool will be liable to the hell of fire.” (Matthew 5:22-23)

The Lord differentiates grades of sin. The Just Judge will keep proportion when he metes out (administers) condign punishment.

As Christians, we should first recognise that anger is a sin, and that, having a duty not to sin, we must strive to overcome it. There is nothing strong or admirable about anger: it is a weakness. It is one thing to be firm, and even to speak without compromise, drawing a line which is not to be crossed. That can be done with self-control. But anger is inimical to self-control.

Unless I make the effort to control it, I will never feel the effects which my anger has on other people and upon myself. Neither will I see how this anger cuts me off from God, harming my relationship with him.

To see my anger and its effects, I have to be honest with myself. And *I have to want to be honest with myself.*

It is easy for us to excuse our own anger: we always have a pretext (“It was your fault.” “If I have told you once ...” “When will you ever learn?” “Is this the thanks I get for everything I’ve done?”)

Yet, we find it harder to see that other people have an excuse for being angry with us: we can usually see that we had the best of intentions, and that getting angry with us is not solution to any problem.

But isn’t it funny, or rather, isn’t it tragic, that we so often get angry when we think we can get away with it, but when we know that we will face recriminations, we manage to “control ourselves”? We don’t say to ourselves: “This is my daughter, I can yell at her and no one can say anything to me”, or “This man will slug me in the face if I don’t keep cool”. It happens because of our underlying attitudes – and we are responsible for our attitudes

This shows that we are need to learn how to form patterns of virtue. Some of us have been taught, not in words, but by example, that if we do not get angry when something is wrong, then we are not taking the matter seriously, or that it will never change. So we may even believe that it is just and fair to be angry.

But as Christians, we should be angry only with sin (our own sin before all others: see Matthew 7:3-5) The Christian will make the effort to know what his passions are, and to master them. Recognising that anger is sinful, I need to see where I am angry, where I have a tendency to anger.

There are certain occasions and circumstances which seem to call forth a wrathful reaction. I need to see what those are, because those situations in which anger recurs are the most important for my spiritual development. The existence of a pattern of angry reactions is like the “X” on the pirate’s treasure map. “X” marks the spot where I must dig.

There is nothing strong or admirable about anger. It is a weakness. People can often tell this. They eventually learn that some people will get angry because they are wrong and know it.

It can take a long time to see this, but the fact is that the reaction which takes place within me is so fast that it seems as if that circumstance causes the anger. But it is not a simple question of an external event causing an internal reaction. When I am in a good mood I can smile at things which would otherwise bother me, and vice versa. A person in a bad enough mood, especially if they are used to throwing their weight around, and have a vanity which is pleased by being able to dominate other people through anger, will find things to get upset about—even if nothing is really wrong.

It is more a sort of chemical reaction: something outside occurs, and something within me takes this as a trigger, a sort of permission to get angry. And this I must resist, by changing my attitudes, and striving to be just and wise, for the love of God.

“Brethren, do not let the sun go down upon your anger”, Ephesians 4:26.