

Get a Grip

The Rev. Dr.
E. Stanley Ott

Genesis 4:1-8

Sermon Series:
Seven Greatest
Virtues and Vices:
Anger and Patience

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All summer we have been talking about the seven deadly sins and the seven lively virtues. So, there is the sin of pride and the virtue of humility, lust and chastity, envy and kindness, and so on. Today, we look at the sin of anger and the corresponding virtue of patience and its companion, self-control. In its range from annoyance and resentment to raging emotion, anger has a way of popping up when you least expect it. Ann Marie and I were visiting the Eastern Market in the District a few weeks ago. I parked at a meter, put in two hours worth of quarters, and off to breakfast we went. After breakfast, I knew we had some shopping to do and went back to add some time to the thirty minutes we had left on the meter. As I approached the car, I could see a pink slip under the windshield wiper.

What is this? A fifty-dollar ticket, that's what! I check the meter. Thirty minutes left. I look around. No meter officer in sight. With a rapidly rising burn, I toss in more quarters and leave the ticket so I don't get ticketed twice. After going through the farmer's market and picking up a couple of ears

of corn, we head back to the car, and I am meditating on the two ears of corn, which would be twenty-five dollars a piece ears of corn after paying the parking ticket. I get in the car just plain mad and read the ticket. "Your State Inspection sticker is past due." What? I look at the sticker on the windshield. It had expired a month ago. So I moved from being annoyed with some unknown officer just doing his or her job to ticked off with myself! All of which says anger and pride; in fact, all of the seven deadly sins do have a way of popping up in our lives.

This morning, we hear perhaps the most famous story of the deadly sin of anger in all of human experience. Genesis 4:1-7. ¹Now the man knew his wife Eve, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, 'I have produced a man with the help of the Lord.' ²Next she bore his brother Abel. Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a tiller of the ground. ³In the course of time Cain brought to the Lord an offering of the fruit of the ground, ⁴and Abel for his part brought of the firstlings of his flock, their fat portions. And the Lord had regard for Abel and his offering, ⁵but for Cain and his offering he had no

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regard. Now you know right away that God's approval was not about whether the offering was fruit or fat, because throughout Scripture we see the professions of both shepherds and farmers regarded in a good light. Something else led the Lord to have regard for Abel's sacrifice and no regard for Cain's.

So Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell. ⁶The Lord said to Cain, 'Why are you angry, and why has your countenance fallen?' ⁷If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it.' So, something about Cain's work was not done well, or perhaps the spirit with which he worked was an issue. Perhaps he was lazy, the sin of sloth. Perhaps his was the sin of envy—the envy of Abel. We don't know the exact reason Cain and his sacrifice were not well-regarded by God, but we do hear the Lord's warning to Cain that sin is lurking at the door. In essence, God said, "Sin, in this case the sin of anger, wants to get a grip on you, Cain, but you have to get a grip on it." The sins of envy, pride and anger rise up and get the grip on Cain that he was supposed to get on them. ⁸*Cain said to his brother Abel, 'Let us go out to the field.'* And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him.

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A few weeks ago, we said the deadly sin of lust happens when you yield yourself to passions that consume you. So, lust and anger feed off of each other as anger easily leads to a lust for more anger. We used the image of a runaway, unbridled elephant, because when the elephant is unbridled with an all-consuming lust for anger, the rider has no control at all. Something is going to get trampled. There will be consequences, consequences that diminish, damage and destroy someone or something. When Cain allows his anger to become an unbridled passion, he doesn't "get a grip" and Abel dies.

Of course, anger in itself is not sin. We see in Scripture that our holy God is angered by injustice, angered by people who sin and turn their backs on the God who loves them. Jesus clearly was angry when he cleared the temple of those who abused and used people. If there is an attack, a threat or some ill-treatment aimed at you or someone or something significant to you, or there is something that is deeply disappointing to you, the experience of anger is quite normal and such reaction is not sin in itself. The issue is what you do with it. Does your anger lead you to resolve a situation in an appropriate manner, to defend a person, to address some inappropriate or inadequate behavior, or does your anger

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lead you to diminish, damage or destroy? I think of a friend whose wife told me that he would regularly punch his fist through the walls of his home in anger. I drove by a mother and a teenage daughter in their front yard screaming at each other while trying to pull each other's hair out. I have heard abusive language yelled by angry parents in various athletic contests, school board meetings and other such settings. So have you. Anger becomes a sin crouching at the door as it was with Cain when you permit it to become an unbridled passion and lose your grip on your mind, your mouth and your manners, and the result is to diminish, damage and destroy.

Scripture has a lot to say about anger. For example, in the Proverbs we read: *Fools show their anger at once, but the prudent ignore an insult* (Proverbs 12:16). *Whoever is slow to anger has great understanding, but one who has a hasty temper exalts folly* (Proverbs 14:29). *A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger* (Proverbs 15:1). *Those who are hot-tempered stir up strife, but those who are slow to anger calm contention* (Proverbs 15:18).

As writer Francine Morrisette expresses it, "Anger has many forms, so it's a tricky sort of sin. Resentment is anger. Passive-aggressive

behavior is a form of anger, too. Although anger sometimes looks like a red-faced shouting, stomping tantrum, it is frequently subtle and harbored in secret. Anger is a serious sin, because it leads to committing other serious sins. People cheat, lie, steal, and kill out of anger. You may not have control over the things other people do that anger you, but you do have control over what you do when you are angered. It is not a sin to feel anger and then let it go; it is a sin to act out on it or to hold onto it."¹

So, we hear what God said to Cain and know God is saying the same thing to us—that we must master the sin crouching at our door, get a grip on our anger. How can we do that? We will touch on two of many aspects of the management of our anger. First, we learn to distinguish between inconvenience and injustice or genuine injury. Second, we practice two of the fruits of the Holy Spirit, which directly address getting a grip on your reactions of anger, the virtue of patience and its companion, self-control.

I know you know what real injustice and injury are. What do I mean by inconvenience? In church life, I have seen people become irate because they didn't like the size of the font in the bulletin, they didn't

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like the kind of communion bread we used, they didn't like a piece of music. There was a story last week in the newspaper of a husband who was furious because of the color his wife painted a room. In our homes, church, places of work and community it is certainly appropriate that we have our opinions and our aesthetic preferences but do matters of simple inconvenience merit the anger that diminishes, damages and destroys the people and things in our lives? Injustice and injury are far more serious matters that deserve appropriate response.

Robert Fulghum, in his book *Uh-Oh*, tells of working as a young man at an inn in the Sierra Nevada Mountains. He was angry because the employees were served the same food every lunch—two hot dogs, sauerkraut and stale rolls—and the cost was deducted from their paychecks. One night, he vented himself to a guest in the inn, one Sigmund Wollman. Banging on the front desk with a fly swatter, kicking chairs and amid much profanity Fulghum yelled, *I have had it up to here. I am going to get a plate of hot dogs and sauerkraut and throw it on the inn owner. I am sick of this. Who does he think he is? The whole hotel stinks and the guests are all idiots and I am packing my bags and going to Montana where they wouldn't feed hot dogs and sauerkraut to pigs.*

Sigmund Wollman sat and listened to this tirade go on for twenty minutes. Wollman, who had spent three years in the Concentration Death Camp of Auschwitz during the Second World War, finally said, "Fulghum, are you finished?" "No. Why?" "Lissen, Fulchum. Lissen me. Lissen me. You know what's wrong with you? It's not hot dogs and sauerkraut and it's not the boss and it's not the chef and it's not this job." "So what's wrong with me?" "Fulchum, you think you know everything but you don't know the difference between an inconvenience and a problem. If you break your neck, you have nothing to eat, your house is on fire—then you've got a problem. Everything else is inconvenience. Life *is* inconvenient. Life is lumpy. Learn to separate the inconveniences from the real problems. You will live longer. And you will not annoy people like me so much. Good night."² With that he sent Fulghum off to bed. It helps in getting a grip on our anger for us to distinguish between the inconvenient and that which is genuinely unjust or injurious.

We also get a grip on our anger as we practice the lively virtue of patience. The word that is translated patience in the original New Testament Greek language is one we have talked about before, the word *makro-*

² Robert J. Morgan *Stories, Illustrations & Quotes* pp. 32-32

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thumia. The *makros* part of *makrothumia* means “large or long” and the *thumia* part of *makrothumia* means heat or temper. So *makrothumia* is literally a long temper—the exact opposite of a short temper. It means a long bearing with something or someone that annoys you. Sometimes the word is translated as long-suffering or patience. I like to understand *makrothumia* to mean the grace of getting along. The grace of getting along is the quality of self-restraint in the face of provocation, which does not quickly retaliate. Psalm 145:8: *The LORD is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger [makrothumia] and rich in love.* Proverbs 19:11: *Those with good sense are slow to anger, and it is their glory to overlook an offense.* The apostle Peter made the same point when he said, *Love covers a multitude of sins* (I Peter 4:8).

I was in a hurry recently and needed to use the Dulles Toll Road to get where I was going on time. I took the tollbooth line for those with the E-ZPass which had only one car in front of me while a long line of cars was backed up by the manned tollbooth. Evidently, the person in front of me did not realize that money in the form of quarters was going to be helpful. You could see the driver looking in the glove compartment, under the seat, and, meanwhile, every single car in the other lane moved on. I was not

feeling very much like *makrothumia*, the patient grace of getting along, yet even in that simple moment was the choice of being gripped by the sin of anger crouching at the door or getting a grip by the grace of God.

If the virtue of patience, *makrothumia*, the grace of getting along in the face of irritation, is one means to get a grip on our anger, its companion virtue of self-control is another. Self-control means the controlling power of the will under the influence of God’s Spirit. The root of the Greek word that is translated self-control is strength, as it is your strength of character that controls your anger. Scripture says, *Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger* (Ephesians 4:26). You are responsible for how you handle your anger. Period. It’s perfectly okay to be angry but not okay for you to permit that anger to damage, diminish or destroy. If you realize your anger has damaged, diminished or destroyed people or relationships in your life, in your home, in your place of employment, wherever, hear the very blunt word of Jesus: *If you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled* (Matthew 5:23-24). Make it right. If you know that anger is something you don’t manage well, that its grip on you is stronger than your grip on it,

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then check out anger management help on the web. Or let us put you in touch with someone who can help. It is life for you, and it is life for the people in your life.

Do you know that God's love and the sacrifice of Jesus who died for you means that our Lord loves you personally, always? Do the people in your life know that you will never withdraw your love from them, even in the moments you are angry, even angry with them? One day, a woman by the name of Beth was driving a classic MG sports car through the afternoon traffic. She enjoyed the quick response of the small, high-powered convertible that was her husband's pride and joy. Suddenly, she saw a blur of color out of the corner of her eye. Before she consciously considered her actions, she swerved to miss the small boy on the bicycle and veered into the side of a large, gray, pickup truck. The car slammed to a stop, the crush of metal, the sound of shattering glass. Then all was very still for what seemed like a long time. "Hey, lady. You ok?" Strong arms lifted Beth from the vehicle and helped her to the curb. "I'm fine," she said, "just let me sit here a moment."

All she could think was, "I'm fine now, but Jim's going to kill me when I get home." She knew how excited he was when he found this car. He had

wanted one ever since he was a boy. This one was a rare treasure, and he had spent countless Saturdays fixing and polishing it. He was not going to be a happy camper. A policeman walked up. "May I see your driver's license and insurance papers, miss?" She walked to the car, got her purse, and grabbed the insurance packet from the glove compartment. She gave the officer her license and opened the plastic package that contained the insurance papers. To her surprise, there on top of all the documents was a white envelope with her name on it. She opened it and began to read: "Dear Beth, if you are reading this, you have probably been in an accident. Don't worry. I pray that you are all right, and just remember it's you that I love. Jim."³

Do the people in your life know that you love them, respect them, and show dignity to them even in times of your anger? If the causes for anger in your life threaten to master you and to overwhelm your capacity to love the people in your life, it's time to get a grip, time to allow the Spirit-given *makrothumia*, the long-tempered grace of getting along and the strength of your self-control, to become the true new master of your life.

³ source unknown