

“The Seven Deadly Sins: Ira (Wrath)”

Galatians 5:13-24

29 July 2007

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Galatians 5:13-24

For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another. Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law. Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.

Prayer.

The cardinal sin of wrath,
as defined by some
is the inordinate and uncontrolled
feelings of hatred and anger.¹

It may be rooted in biology
where the neurons and synapse meet.
Scientists have learned that
emotions are buried deep in the amygdala,
the region of the brain that
identifies threats and danger.
The amygdala transmits this information
to the cortex
where thoughts and judgment are rooted
such that a reasonable response
can be made.
“In other words,
our brains are wired in such a way

as to influence us to act
before we can properly consider
the consequences of our actions.”²

This is very important
because too often
we believe that anger is bad.
Experiencing an emotion is bad.
When in reality
we are at the mercy of our emotions;
they are not within our ability to alter.
But what we can change
is how we react to
our natural, God given emotions.
Simply put,
being angry isn't bad.
Anger is normal and natural.
What is bad is what people do with their anger.
Which puts us squarely in agreement
with Ephesians.

¹ As found at
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seven_deadly_sins

² http://mentalthelp.net/poc/view_doc.php?type=doc&id=5805&cn=116

“Be angry
but do not sin;
do not let the sun go down
on your anger,”
the apostle Paul
wrote his church in Ephesus,
“and do not make room
for the devil.”³

When we loose control of our anger
that is when we sin, Paul would say.

When our brains are flooded
with catecholamines,
with hormones, adrenaline, and noradrenaline
our heart races
blood pressure rises
the rate of respirations increases.
The face flushes
and blood flow
is re-directed to muscular regions
to prepare for physical action.
Once aroused
what is one to do,
other than to fight?
Thankfully,
the emotional progression
to rage is usually
mitigated by the reason and judgment
of the cerebral cortex,
harnessing the emotion
allowing one to regain control.

Certainly, the not everyone's cortex
is equal.
Held within the folds of the human brain
there may exist genetic predispositions,
flaws in specific genes,
that may alter one's ability to
respond proportionally.
Scientist suggest this may
describe why some are at higher risk
of socially harmful behavior:
aggressiveness, antisocial behavior, depression,

³ Ephesians 4:26-27 (NRSV)

suicide, or substance abuse.⁴

“Be angry
but do not sin;”
we are reminded.

Balancing the call of nature
is the attention brought by modern psychology;
that nurture,
or environment,
has an equal role to play
with nature.
Deep in the formation of personality
and identity
where the presence of absence
of maternal and paternal love
certainly contributes to future development
we acquire the learned
cognitive means to respond to anger.
Through observation
and trial and error
we modify our approach to
anger with each successive encounter,
testing the boundaries,
learning the limits,
of what is acceptable.
If one discovers that violence
is an appropriate response
to anger
couldn't one assume that a childhood filled with
violence
would lead to the creation of a violent adult?

“Be angry
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do not let the sun go down
on your anger,”
the apostle Paul
wrote his church in Ephesus,
“and do not make room
for the devil.”⁵

The sin of wrath

⁴ As found at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wrath>

⁵ Ephesians 4:26-27 (NRSV)

is the inability to control our response
to insert some perspective and objectivity
into the equation.

In his letter to the Galatians,
Paul lists anger as
“the work of the flesh.”⁶

Insufficient cerebral cortex
or undeveloped cerebral cortex
- when one hasn't taken the time
to learn alternatives to violence
or new strategies for anger management -
is all about being a slave to the flesh.
Regardless of what one's
predisposed risks may be
God grants everyone the opportunity
to overcome those risks,
to develop the academic, emotional, and spiritual
tools
to cut anger at the quick;
to stop it short before it manifests
as denial, impatience, sulking,
passive-aggressive behavior,
revenge, rage, wrath, assault, murder,
even genocide.

When we employ these strategies,
when we cut it in the quick,
we don't allow it to fester,
we don't wait for sundown.
For, as Paul rightly recognizes,
when we sleep on our anger,
we make room for the devil,
where here-to-for,
there had been no room.

Many of us enjoy
driving a standard shift transmission.
Some even prefer it,
though it has become
a less popular option
on most new cars.
When first put into the driver's seat
with an extra pedal on the floor,
one must find a new way;

⁶ Galatians 5:20 (NRSV)

how to change
from one gear into another.
The brain needs to map out
the graceful dance necessary
to have control of
the gas and the clutch
with both feet.
Once learned and
burned into the brain,
it simply becomes second nature,
without conscious thought,
for the rest of one's life.
It is an art, in some respects,
the graceful transition
- releasing power
changing the gear
and the reapplication of power -
that causes the RPMs to hum
as a delightful melody to the driver's ear.

In some respects
responding to anger
can be compared to
learning to drive a stick shift.
The transition from
anger to objectivity
and from objectivity
to resolution
needs to be,
and can become,
just as graceful,
given the time and experience
- to make it second nature,
to burn it into our brain -
making it a life-long skill.

The first step is objectivity.
When exposed to anger
the old adage of
“take a deep breath
step back
and count to ten”
is full of a lot of good wisdom.
Taking a breath
holds the tongue.

It's hard to speak
while inhaling.
So, the deeper the breath,
the more time you give yourself,
to recall the strategy
to resist the sin of wrath.
Stepping back
puts a little distance between you
and your advisory.
It puts each of you out of punching range,
limiting a violent response.
It allows others to interject
in an effort to reveal the details completely
and limit the damage.
Counting to ten
forces the mind to dis-engage,
allowing the cerebral cortex
to shut down the amygdala
and limit the expression
of contributing compounds.
Counting to ten
can allow you to begin to
consider alternative approaches,
other ways to respond,
different solutions to the conflict.
Stepping back
allows one to consider
what has been taught
what one has learned from previous experience
that will be more likely to result
in success
for everybody's benefit.

The second step is to implement
a solution before the sun sets.
This is where the going gets rough,
even for fully mature adults.
Some will go in search of a psychological solution.
Anger management theories
can have mixed results.
Old fashioned "scream therapy"
though intriguing to the imagination
has actually been shown to make matters worse.
Newer approaches,
such as cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT)

and rational emotional behavioral therapy (REBT)
show modest results in bringing
people's anger back down
to more manageable levels.

A far better approach
to implementing an anger management strategy,
I would argue,
is to learn the ways of Christ,
apply them to our lives,
and to modify our approaches
to anger
to become patterned after his example.
Oh, yes,
Jesus had moments of righteous anger,
when confronted with injustice or evil
- who can forget the whip cracking anger
of Jesus when he cleared the temple? -
but, that was the exception,
not the rule.
Instead,
Jesus brings to us a model for redemption
and the gift of forgiveness.
Redemption begins with repentance
- the sincere vow to never do it again,
coupled with making a new choice -
it includes reparation
- paying back and making right
the wrong that has been committed -
and, redemption is completed
with the healing balm of forgiveness
- the restoration of the relationship -
between offenders
and with our God.
Redemption and forgiveness
is at the heart of the Gospel,
it was practiced throughout Jesus' life
and it was confirmed for all time
- won for us, and for our salvation -
with his death upon the cross of Calvary.

If Christ could do that for you and me,
why can't we limit our anger,
temper our wrath,
with others

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and with him?
Why must we be held hostage
to our stubbornness
played out yesterday?
Why must the china
in our lives
always remain broken?
It doesn't have to be this way.

Stop.
Take a deep breath.
Count to ten.
Resolve it
the way Christ would resolve it
before the sun sets upon you.
Where Satan has been allowed
to take up space,
rid him of your life,
and resolve your differences
allowing Christ to guide you.
This,
my beloved,
is the Word of the Lord. Amen.