

Proverbs 14:16–17 (NIV)

¹⁶The wise fear the LORD and shun evil,
but a fool is hotheaded and yet feels secure.

¹⁷A quick-tempered person does foolish things,
and the one who devises evil schemes is hated.

Proverbs 22:24–25 (NIV)

²⁴Do not make friends with a hot-tempered person,
do not associate with one easily angered,

²⁵or you may learn their ways
and get yourself ensnared.

Proverbs 29:22 (NIV)

²²An angry person stirs up conflict,
and a hot-tempered person commits many sins.

Matthew 5:38–48 (NIV)

³⁸“You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ ³⁹But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. ⁴⁰And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. ⁴¹If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles. ⁴²Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.

⁴³“You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’

⁴⁴But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. ⁴⁶If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? ⁴⁷And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? ⁴⁸Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Mark 3:1–6 (NIV)

Another time Jesus went into the synagogue, and a man with a shriveled hand was there. ²Some of them were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, so they watched him closely to see if he would heal him on the Sabbath. ³Jesus said to the man with the shriveled hand, “Stand up in front of everyone.”

⁴Then Jesus asked them, “Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?” But they remained silent.

⁵He looked around at them in anger and, deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts, said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” He stretched it out, and his hand was completely restored. ⁶Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus.

Anger. We all know its destructive power.

But can this bellish passion also be a holy emotion, the Godly response to injustice?

Anger? A capital vice? A deadly sin? Shouldn't we be angered when children starve and innocents are murdered? Didn't Jesus get angry? Just look at the passage above from Mark 3. We are told that Jesus “looked around at them in anger.” And he was right to be angry. He knew that his opponents were willfully blind, refusing to hear the Good News in order to protect their own status and reputations. Jesus had no patience for leaders who were leading the people way from God rather than toward God.

But does Jesus' anger or the wrath of God directed at injustice and oppression justify our own anger? We know that our anger is often grounded in our own failings. We lash

out destructively. Anger destroys relationships and lives. So what gives? Jesus certainly warned his disciples about the danger of their anger:

“You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, ‘Raca,’ is answerable to the court. And anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell.

“Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift.” (Matthew 5:21-24)

So which is it? The answer really is, “it depends.” Remember, the capital vices are all perversions of the deepest and most significant human desires, which become excessive, destructive, and disordered. Thus, as Rebecca DeYoung puts it, anger can be both a holy emotion and a hellish passion. Indeed, anger can be so hellish, so destructive, that some Christians have believed anger, in all forms and on all occasions, is simply to be avoided. But others have rightfully concluded that anger in the face of injustice, oppression, and evil in all its forms is the appropriate and virtuous response.

We know that we sometimes get angry too easily, responding angrily over every little thing. That is usually what we mean when we say someone is “in a mood.” Stay clear of them. Give them a wide berth. Every little thing is setting them off. As DeYoung puts it,

I want what I want, and woe to anyone or anything that gets in my way. The cause it promotes is the Me-First Agenda. . . . Anger’s fighting power is directed toward protecting me and my interests, to the exclusion of the claims of others. A slight to my honor, damage to my reputation, disrespect to my person— these are frequent anger triggers. “The underlying message of highly angry people,” according to the American Psychological Association website, is that “things oughta go my way!” Angry people tend to feel that . . . any blocking or changing of their plans is an unbearable indignity and that they should not have to suffer this way. Maybe other people do, but not them!¹

I know that sometimes I’ve been “in a mood,” you probably have too. I’ve also known people for whom this just seemed to become a habit, a means of trying to get things their way – a vice.

We know too that we often get angrier than we should, letting our tempers get the better of us. When our son Robby was young, he had quite a temper. But my wife and I knew we had to break him of that habit; he would assuredly grow into a tall and strong man capable of great physical harm in the grip of his temper. And we did. Robby learned self-control.

We also get anger wrong when we nurse grudges, when we stay angry for too long. Sometimes it has seemed to me that people have to work at this. It is as if their grudge has become a constant companion that must be fed and nourished.

But the real issue when it comes to answering the question, “Holy Emotion or Hellish Passion?” is the object of our anger. For anger to be a holy emotion, it must have justice as its object and love as its root. Holy anger fights for a God-pleasing cause.

When it is good, anger is a passion for justice, motivated by love for others. We get angry when someone we care about is hurt or threatened. This person may be ourselves or a “neighbor whom we love as ourselves.” This is often most intensely expressed in families, where ties of love are strongest: novelist Alan Paton described one mother as “like a tigress for the child.” The fiercer the love and the greater the good at stake, the more intense our capacity for anger. Great love is the root of great anger. You don’t get angry unless you care. Like all the passions, for Aquinas, anger is

¹ DeYoung, Rebecca Konyndyk (2009-06-01). *Glittering Vices: A New Look at the Seven Deadly Sins and Their Remedies*. Baker Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

rooted ultimately in love. Apathy is the tepid alternative to both love and anger. At its best, and rightly expressed, anger is “the power of resistance in the soul,” a passionate protector and defender of good.²

In a way, this takes us back to last week, when we looked at sloth, which is resistance to the demands of love. Anger in the face of injustice and evil is the appropriate emotional response when the demands of love are being ignored. Will Willimon offers some pastoral reflections on the place of anger in the Christian life. He writes:

As a pastor, I have grieved over those people— usually women— who suffer some great injustice and who handle it by turning that pain inward upon themselves rather than toward its proper object, the perpetrator of the pain. There are those who think that Christians are not allowed to be angry. If you are Christian, you’ll always be all smiles. I’m thinking of the woman whose husband left her, without word of warning, after two years of marriage. She was terribly depressed. I asked her, as her pastor, “Are you angry that your husband has done this to you?” “No,” she replied, “not really angry, just hurt.” “Not angry?” I asked. “I think you’ve got a right to be angry with him. And maybe angry with God, also. After all, God told you to be faithful in your marriage vows and you were. But the other side of the bargain wasn’t kept. I would think you would be angry!” “No, just hurt,” she said. I decided then and there that depression is often the result of Anger turned inward, Anger inappropriately expressed, Anger suppressed. I told her to go home and read Psalm 137 at least once a day for a week, then come back and we would talk.³

Yes, anger can be a holy emotion that motivates us to do something about the wrongs in this world. Violence, hunger, oppression, racism, and more are all things about which we should be angry – so long as it moves us to godly action, to peace-making, feeding, clothing, embracing. But so often the hellish passion that makes a wreck of our lives flourishes because we are unwilling to forgive.

Forgive and forgive and forgive

Take a breath. A deep one . . . deeper. Now hold it. Keep holding it . . . longer. How long can you hold it? One minute? Two perhaps? Breathing, indeed living, requires us to breathe out as well as breathe in. I remember from my brief flirtation with circuit weight training that it was important to learn the proper way to breathe while struggling to lift the weight. Inhaling was easy, but remembering to exhale was very difficult. I’d just keep holding and holding my breath as I strained to move the weight smoothly and in rhythm.

Forgiveness is like breathing. It must be breathed out as we breathe it in. Forgiveness received is forgiveness that must be passed on. When we are forgiven but refuse to forgive, it is like trying to take in a breath and hold it rather than breathing it out. Sadly, this is a truth that one servant never learned.

The unforgiving servant⁴

Once, Peter asked Jesus how often he should forgive a member of the church who has sinned against him. Perhaps seven times, Peter suggested. (I’m guessing Peter was quite angry with this person!) But instead of affirming Peter’s notions of forgiveness, Jesus tells him that he is to forgive “seventy times seven.” In other words, Peter is to forgive without limit. He is to forgive and forgive and forgive and forgive . . . Jesus

² Ibid.

³ Willimon, William H. (2013-02-01). *Sinning Like a Christian: A New Look at the Seven Deadly Sins* (p. 64). Abingdon Press. Kindle Edition.

⁴The parable is about a master and slaves, though modern translations often use the term “servant,” to help the reader understand that slavery in the ancient world was different in many respects from our own tragic experience with the horrors of African slavery. In the ancient world, slavery was common, often arising from indebtedness and even self-sale, in addition to the enslavement of conquered peoples. By some estimates, 35% of the Roman Empire’s population were slaves. Household servants were usually slaves. In the Greco-Roman world of Jesus’ day, even households of modest means could afford two or three slaves.

then told Peter a parable to help him grasp the full truth about forgiveness (Matthew 18:21-35).

A king was settling up accounts with his slaves. There is one slave who owes the king a lot of money. So much money that it certainly would have conjured up visions of astounding wealth, for it would take the average laborer 15-20 years to earn a single talent and the slave owes the king 10,000 talents!⁵ To settle up as best he can, the king orders that the slave and his family be sold as well as all the man's possessions. But when the slave falls on his knees and begs for mercy, the king forgives all the debt – all 10,000 talents. All of it. One could hardly imagine a more gracious act.

One would think that being the recipient of such forgiveness would forever change a person. Yet, this same slave refuses even to be patient with a fellow slave who owes him a small sum, no more than a few weeks' wages.. Seemingly forgetting, though probably just not caring, about the grace shown himself, the forgiven but unforgiving slave has the debtor thrown into prison. When the king learns what has happened, the slave's original debts are reinstated and he is tossed into prison where he will stay until he can repay the 10,000 talents – which he will never be able to do.

Reciprocity

Reciprocity was highly valued in the ancient near-eastern cultures. If someone does something for me, I then am obligated to do something similar for them. The forgiven servant naturally then assumes that the reciprocity he owes his master is to be extended only to his master.

But the parable makes clear that the generosity the slave received should have been passed on to others. As John Carroll writes, “The kindness from which I have benefitted should reach to touch others who had no part in that original act of kindness. Since, in the parable, the king in some way embodies the graciousness of God, the point is that I should be so transformed by the experience of divine grace that I am able to bring that same grace and mercy into all my relationships with others.”⁶

Eduard Schweizer put it this way: “God's forgiveness is not for decoration but for use.” Living, truly God-shaped living, requires that forgiveness be breathed out, not just breathed in. A truly grateful heart is also a forgiving heart, a heart that resists the hellish passion of self-serving anger.

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

Monday, Genesis 45:5-14 & 50:15-21 Joseph (of the many-colored coat) forgives his enemies.	Tuesday, 1 Samuel 24: 8-12 & 26:21-25 David forgives Saul for trying to kill him.
Wednesday, Nehemiah 9 The people of God gather to confess their sins to a forgiving God (v. 17 contains a well-known description of God's forgiveness and love).	Thursday, Matthew 6:14-15 & Matthew 18:21-22 Jesus teaches about our duty to forgive without limit.
Friday, 2 Corinthians 2:5-11 Paul urges the Corinthian church to forgive and call home someone who had done something bad enough to be removed from the church.	Weekly Prayer Concerns

⁵This is a good time to remind ourselves that Jesus' parables are not meant to be utterly realistic depictions of life. They are teaching tools. We aren't to worry about how a slave could assemble wealth that would rival Bill Gates.

⁶from *Preaching the Hard Sayings of Jesus* by James and John Carroll, Hendrickson Publishing, 1996. The later quote from Schweizer is also from the Carrolls' book.

What about turning the other cheek?

“You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also.

Is Jesus telling us to be doormats? In his book, *Seven: The Deadly Sins and The Beatitudes*, Jeff Cook sheds some light on Jesus’ meaning.

First, when you are struck on the right cheek, Jesus said not to hit back but to offer your other cheek to an assailant, which invites a question. Why specify cheeks? Who cares which cheek? Jesus’ contemporaries knew perfectly well. A slap to the right side of the face meant you had been backhanded. The backhand was reserved for inferiors. Masters used backhands against slaves, husbands against wives, Romans against Jews. The intention of the backhand was to humiliate, to put someone in their place — and in each case, if you were the one being beaten, physical retaliation would have been suicidal. Backhands were used when it was clear that the person being hit had no possible comeback.

Why wouldn’t such people have been slapped on their left cheek? Backhanding someone’s left cheek would require an assailant to use his left hand, but in Jesus’ culture the left hand was not used to interact with others. People took care of all their bodily nastiness with the left hand. No one used their left hand to interact with others. In fact, even to gesture with the left hand had serious consequences. Handshakes, waves, even assaults were performed with the right hand. So what is the logic of turning the other cheek?

Well, notice that if your left cheek is turned toward an assailant, he cannot use the back of his right hand. A backhand would break your nose, and that’s not the point of a backhand. Again, the backhand was used to humiliate. The only way an assailant could use his right hand to strike your left cheek would be with his fist. If the assailant wants a clean hit, he will have to throw a punch. But here is the sheer brilliance of Jesus’ teaching: fists are only used in fights between equals. Far from being a passive act, turning the other cheek says to an assailant, “Punch me and make me your equal, or else you are a coward.” By turning the other cheek, the assaulted strip their oppressors of the power to dehumanize them. This is an overt act of nonviolent defiance, as well as a bold affirmation of one’s self-worth.

An interesting interpretation that makes sense in such a status-conscious culture. What do you think?

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. I’m pretty sure we’ve all experienced the hellish passion of anger. Have you known anyone in whom such anger seemed to take root, so that they simply became an angry person? How could anger become a habit? How do we use it to get our way?
2. Think about anger that has justice as its object and love as its root. Have you experienced such anger? Have you seen it in others? What is the risk of this holy emotion?
3. You might share some of your own stories about the power of forgiveness. What do these stories share in common? Have you ever been surprised by the outcome created by forgiveness? How so? Why do we find it so difficult to forgive? Why are we so often insistent that forgiveness must be preceded by an apology? Do you think that forgiveness can *create* a repentant heart? How might this be?
4. Let’s turn to God’s forgiveness of ourselves. Few topics in my classes lead to more tears than this one. It seems that many of us have a very difficult time truly accepting and believing that we have been forgiven, that nothing we’ve done in the past lies outside the power of God’s grace. Why do you think that this is so difficult to accept? How can we make God’s forgiveness seem more concrete and certain? If we accept that the ground of our forgiveness is the cross, how can we help others to see that there could be no better demonstration of the depth of God’s love? The limitations lie in our own abilities to receive, not in God’s ability to give. Perhaps forgiving must *precede* our heart’s ability to truly embrace forgiveness, not the reverse. To put it another way, perhaps we can’t really experience forgiveness until we have forgiven.

