

SERMON TITLE: “The Seven Deadly Sins: Wrath”  
SERMON TEXT: Mark 3:1-6 and several other verses (see end of sermon)<sup>1</sup>  
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James  
OCCASION: March 15, 2020, at First UMC

## **INTRODUCTION**

Back in January, when I was planning for Lent, we were just beginning to hear about the Coronavirus in China. As I read and heard about their quarantines, I realized that the word *quarantine* comes from the Latin word for 40. That was a perfect analogy for Lent, I thought, since Lent is the 40-day time of purifying oneself in preparation for the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. Just as a 40-day quarantine was intended to limit and heal sickness, it seemed appropriate that our Lenten theme this year would be limiting and healing us from “The Seven Deadly Sins.”

When I made that plan back in January, little did I know how real this Lenten parallel would be by mid-March. When the Coronavirus was just in China, it seemed fairly abstract and distant. But now that it’s here in the United States and Utah, it feels a lot more relevant. And now that the virus is closing down of all kinds of gatherings and events—including worship services and classes in our church—yikes! Here we are today holding worship over Facebook Live, or you may be reading this sermon in print, because—out of the need to contain, limit, and stop this virus from killing us—we are having to take this COVID-19 very seriously. Otherwise, while most of us would probably survive it, many would not.

And just like the Coronavirus can be deadly to our bodies, so can sin be deadly to our spirits. That was the point of the classical list of The Seven Deadly Sins that has been passed along since the fourth century. So far in Lent, our church has discussed Gluttony, Sloth, and Envy. Today, we’re going to think about the deadly sin of Wrath.

## **1—WHAT IS WRATH?**

Let’s begin with a definition. What is wrath? Well, most of us would probably use different words like *anger* or *rage*. Wrath can be a momentary flash of emotion, or it can be a way of life.

My cousin posted a joke on his Facebook page that gives another way to think about wrath:

*How do you make a Pirate mad? You take away his "P."* If you don't get that right away, don't feel bad. I had to think about it too. If you take away the first letter "P" from *Pirate*, what's left is the word *irate*.

Wrath, anger, rage, mad, irate. Those are the harsh forms of the feeling. They make us think of people who need to take anger management classes or who express themselves through road rage. If we aren't connecting these feelings to ourselves yet, we could add some softer forms of wrath like frustration and irritation. We could talk about feeling disturbed, annoyed, vexed, exasperated, dissatisfied, aggravated, and pushed to the breaking point. And if we added how we respond to those feelings, we could list aggression, violence, biting our tongues, clenching our teeth, or lashing out.

When we think of wrath, we tend to think in large-scale proportions like the Star Trek movie *The Wrath of Khan* about a character who escapes from a 15-year exile to exact a horrible revenge on Captain Kirk. Or maybe we think about the movie *The Incredibles*, in which Mr. Incredible's #1 fan Buddy feels rejected and morphs from IncrediBoy into the evil Syndrome in order to fulfill his angry revenge. We think of wrath as that kind of anger that seethes and increases and plots and schemes until it finds its moment to return pain for pain, an eye for an eye, or a terrible tragedy in exchange for what have might only been an accidental slight or misunderstanding.

And that's the big problem with wrath, isn't it? It can grow completely out of proportion to what aggravated it. The source of our wrath can even be a figment of our imaginations, derived from our own insecurities. Most of us know of one time or another when we ourselves significantly over-reacted, not because the other person did anything so terribly wrong, but because we ourselves were in a vulnerable place. We had been hurt too many times before and this last tiny offense was the straw that broke the camel's back. Sometimes we even suffer from PTSD, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, because of how we have been hurt in the past. Soldiers who come home from military service, persons who have been raped or assaulted, children and adults who have suffered from domestic violence,

those who have witnessed tragedies, and many more can all be especially vulnerable to even small triggers that cause us to flare up in fear, frustration, anger, and rage.

## **2—DIVINE PURPOSE OF WRATH**

I have to admit that the subject of wrath is complicated, even in the Bible, because of the fact that God is one of the main actors. A large number of stories in the Bible claim some terrible thing either did happen or will happen because of God's punishing wrath. Even the story I selected from Mark 3:1-6 is about Jesus' anger. Rather than deny divine anger, it's important for us to see what it is that God and Jesus get so frustrated about. In this story, Jesus entered a synagogue, and he saw a man with a withered hand. Jesus knew he had the power to help this man, and he did. But before he performed the healing, Jesus asked the other synagogue worshipers if it would be OK, if it would be lawful, to save life on the Sabbath? Their silence indicated that they valued the rules of their religious tradition more than they valued the well-being of their neighbor. It was because of the hardness of their hearts that Jesus grieved and became angry.

Wrath is an emotion that God gave us. Righteous anger like Jesus had can be a good thing. It's important for us to feel angry when someone is hurt or sick or suffering from poverty and no one is doing anything to help them. When the system is rigged against certain groups of people, or when a bully is causing harm, we shouldn't remain silent and do nothing. We shouldn't be apathetic and lethargic and say, "Well that's just the way it is," or "That must be God's will." We should get angry. I think that's the point of what the Old Testament prophets and Jesus were demonstrating. They wanted us to know that God does get mad when people take advantage of others, when they abuse and oppress them or ignore their misery. Like Jesus healing the man's withered hand or Jesus overturning the moneychangers' tables in the temple, they wanted us to feel motivated by divine anger, so we could get unstuck and make some positive changes.

In those kind of situations, wrath is a divinely good thing. And we should not be so afraid of the dangers of anger that we stifle its benevolent power in our lives and our society. One author has written that “wariness over the temptation to wrath should not temper our passion for justice now; rather, [our wariness] should keep our anger and its frustration focused on God’s agenda.”<sup>2</sup> The same author writes that “anger, when it is a *holy* emotion, has *justice* as its object and *love* as its root.”<sup>3</sup> That’s the divine purpose of anger.

### **3—MANAGING OUR ANGER**

Of course, **we** aren’t Jesus, and **we** aren’t God. So we mere mortals have to be much more careful about assuming that our anger is righteous. Many proverbial-warning scriptures in the Bible caution us to be very careful about anger.<sup>1</sup> We have to keep within ourselves a measure of doubt about our own judgment. There is nothing more dangerous than righteous certainty. Genocides have been perpetrated against whole populations in the name of God. We should never, ever let our anger become like that. Even capital punishment against individual persons has been proven over and over again to be notoriously wrong. Yes, we have the right to be angry about murder, and, yes, we should try to discourage murder from happening. But, no, we don’t have the right to be mortally angry against the wrong person. And far too often our judicial system has condemned the wrong persons. Our anger must always be tempered with a great deal of wisdom and caution.

One of the best ways to deal with our anger is to give it to God. While the expression of our wrath can have severe consequences against ourselves and other people, God has such big shoulders that even the worst rage we can muster will never hurt God. In large part, that’s what the Book of Psalms is about. If you don’t read the Bible much, you might think that the Psalms are all sweet praises to God on high. You might think that because we worship leaders cherry-pick the happiest parts of the Psalms for our use in worship. But, within the 150 Psalms, there are lots and lots of verses in which the Psalm writers are crying out to God in pain, anguish, and, yes, anger. The emotions in these songs are so

raw and sometimes so bitter that they make us uncomfortable. Yet how much better it is to pour out our anger to God in a prayer than it is to actually lash out in violence. How much better it is to chastise God for not helping us, or for not helping us as fast as we want, than it is to quit praying to God all together. God understands our need to let off some steam sometimes, and God can handle whatever we need to say. And, of course, if we take the time to talk about our anger with God first, then that gives us time to cool down before our hot temper does damage to our relationships with other people.

Sometimes the wrath we humans feel is anger against unrealistic expectations. We feel like life owes us something, and when life doesn't deliver the goods, we feel deprived and angry. Maybe we want other people to do things that they aren't capable of doing or that they rightfully don't want to do. Or maybe we're angry at ourselves because of health limitations that we can't seem to overcome. So another way we can counteract our anger is to lower our expectations and make them more reasonable. Just because someone else got a promotion doesn't mean we are owed one, or that there's a promotion to be had. Just because my husband and I have been married for almost 38 years doesn't mean that he can read my mind. Just because I'd like to be athletically-talented doesn't mean I'll ever have that skill set, no matter how much I practice. Just because we wish this Coronavirus hadn't interrupted all our lives doesn't mean it can instantly go away. Anger is much defused by realistic expectations.

The deadly sinfulness of anger can also be limited and managed by humor. Sometimes we take ourselves and each other way too seriously. If you're finding yourself all tied up in knots of wrath, then tell yourself a joke like that one about the Pirate. *How do you make a Pirate mad? Take away his "P."*

If humor isn't your thing, then try beauty. Go outside and admire nature. Or paint a picture. Or repair a car. Or build something. Or bake a cake. Or play some music. If you're angry because your life is out of control, then find peace in controlling what you can without using the malice of harsh words or violent actions.

## CONCLUSION

In this time of Coronavirus, more than ever, we might feel our nerves frayed. As the stressors mount, we might be more on edge than usual. But wrath doesn't have to be our default position. Anger can be useful for holy motivation sometimes, when we're aligned with God's agenda. But most of the time, we need to be very careful and heed the advice of the Bible's proverbial sayings. Rarely does human anger work the righteousness of God. So let's do our best to be kind to one another. Let's beware of the deadly sinfulness of wrath.

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<sup>1</sup>Scattered throughout the Bible are a number of proverbial-type warnings. We used some of those in the responsive reading:

*Good sense makes a person slow to anger (Proverbs 19:11).*

**Be not quick to anger, for anger lodges in the hearts of fools (Ecclesiastes 7:9).**

*Enmities, strife, anger, quarrels, dissensions—those who do these things will not inherit the kingdom of God (Galatians 5:20-21).*

**Get rid of all anger, wrath, malice, and abusive language (Colossians 3:8).**

*A person given to anger causes much transgression (Proverbs 29:22).*

**Do not let the sun go down on your anger (Ephesians 4:26).**

*Human anger does not work the righteousness of God (James 1:20).*

**Refrain from anger, and forsake wrath (Psalm 37:8)**

All those scriptures warn us to be very careful with our anger. Another passage like that comes from Romans 12, where the Apostle Paul writes,

Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." No, "if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (vv. 17-20).

<sup>2</sup>Rebecca Konyonkyk DeYoung, *Glittering Vices: A New Look at the Seven Deadly Sins and their Remedies*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2009), p. 132.

<sup>3</sup>DeYoung, p. 130.