



# The Seven Deadly Sins (and Their Corresponding Virtues)

## SESSION 5—WRATH AND PATIENCE

| *Is thinking about patience and anger still an important way to contemplate Christian practice?*

### Introduction

At first glance it seems obvious that anger or wrath is something good people should avoid, and that patience is a virtue. Dig a little deeper and questions arise, such as,

- Wasn't Jesus angry when he overturned the tables in the temple?
- Wasn't God's wrath seen when the whole world was consumed by a flood?
- Does being patient mean accepting injustice?

Seeing how Christians throughout history have thought about anger and patience might help us see how these work in our own lives, for better and for worse. The ancient world identified certain common dispositions that reflect our powers for good and evil. Anger and patience were not just momentary emotions but ways to think about how people oriented themselves to the world.

### What the Bible Says

The Bible does not include a list of seven virtues and vices, but anger and patience are found throughout. There are many places where anger is mentioned. The book of Ephesians encourages us not to allow the sun to set on our anger (4:26), but a number of biblical heroes seem to have a temper, not least God and Jesus. This alerts us to some of the complications of anger.

The Bible seems to reserve a place for *righteous* anger. The prophets rail against the injustices Israel commits.



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Yahweh unleashes anger at the whole nation when he feels they have strayed from the path. Jesus tears into traders selling animals for sacrifices at the temple with a whip. There is a sense that anger is cleansing. It clears out abuses that are destructive to human life. But in all of these examples, anger is followed by reconciliation. The prophets invariably follow condemnations with compassion. In the book of Hosea, God puts aside his anger. God, like a good mother, remembers caring for Israel as a child, teaching Ephraim to walk, gathering them in God's arms. The divine mother cries out that she cannot bear to let the consequences of sin fall on Israel: "My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my fierce anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and no mortal, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath" (Hos. 11:8–9). God desires communion with God's people and anger is only for a moment long enough to call a wandering people back.

Patience is also mentioned in the Bible, most notably in Paul's famous hymn in 1 Corinthians 13. It is the handmaid to love: patient and kind, not insisting on its own

way. It is able to bear and believe and hope and endure all things (1 Cor. 13:4, 7). Jesus' suffering on the cross is also taken as an example of patience in the midst of affliction, an inspiration that we, too, can endure suffering without losing our trust that divine goodness and mercy are more ultimate than whatever evil the world can inflict.

## Ancient Christianity

The ancient world had a sophisticated understanding of how the human spirit was shaped by deep and abiding dispositions, spiritual habits that worked for good or ill. Anger was necessary in the city-state and empire because soldiers were needed for military campaigns and their spirited, angry energy fueled their fighting ability. But in general, the ancient world idealized a balanced soul, one that was not inflamed or tyrannized by anger. They idealized *apatheia*, a state free from the tyranny of the passions that is accomplished by what we might call patience. In this sense patience is not long-suffering but a more active calmness or levelheadedness that allows us to act with greater freedom and self-control.

## Early Christians

The desert fathers and mothers of early Christianity began to think about ways in which spiritual habits open or close us to divine love. Monks like Dorotheus of Gaza and Evagrius Ponticus meditated on Scripture day and night, and by spending time in prayer they came to know the inner impulses of the human psyche very well. For these spiritual athletes, the most dangerous passion was almost always identified as anger.

Many of us try to repress and ignore bad emotional habits. We pretend we are not angry or hide from mistakes that overwhelm our sense of identity. But these Christians who dedicated themselves to prayer turned right toward their anger so they could bring it into the healing light of grace. They believed anger was especially powerful in drawing people away from love.

Anger is not a minor moral failing like swearing under your breath at an annoying driver. It is a deep emotional habit that we may not even be fully aware of but which traps us in feelings and actions that lead us astray. Angry feelings and actions are not isolated sins but root habits that express themselves all day long in large and small

ways. Even worse than what we do in anger is what we do not do. Anger neutralizes compassion and sympathy, and so we fail to act with love and responsibility.

By contrast, patience was seen as a virtue that was particularly crucial to spiritual practice. It meant a variety of things, but it was considered a strong antidote to anger. Instead of responding angrily to something that happens, even something that was done unjustly, the desert ascetics encouraged patience. They thought that when we respond to a negative situation calmly, patience digs up the seed of anger. What might have grown into a great tree of rage almost impossible to dig up is steadily reduced to a small sapling, a tiny seed, and eventually disappears altogether. For them, the fires of hell were not external punishments of an angry God but our own uncontrolled rage. Hell was being locked up with nothing but our own out-of-control emotions to gnaw on.

Patience is in this sense a doorway out of this hell. It is a reservoir of levelheadedness that gives us freedom from the automatic violence of anger. Patience is what blows the tiny spark of love into a large fire.

## Anger in Popular Culture

If you look up "seven deadly sins" on Wikipedia, it offers a long list of movies, artwork, poems, and television shows that show how anger, along with the other vices, continues to be part of how we imagine sin's destructive power. Dr. Don King of Montreat College identifies the White Witch as a personification of anger in his essay on the seven deadly sins in Narnia.<sup>1</sup> He points out that in *The Magician's Nephew* Diggory's unreasonable anger at Polly sets in motion the events that introduce the White Witch into Narnia, with disastrous consequences. Just as in ancient Christianity, what might have appeared as a temporary emotional outburst is actually the root evil that introduces the destructive and oppressive power into Narnia.

Somewhat more playfully, several people have identified the inhabitants of Gilligan's Island as personifications of the deadly sins, with the Skipper representing Anger.<sup>2</sup> Part of the reason they remain stuck on the island is that they are trapped by their debilitating emotions. Just as the ascetics thought we were trapped in hell until our emotions were purified, they will all stay



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on their desert island until Skipper transforms his anger into patience and love.

## The Pleasures of Vice: Anger Today

Anger is powerful because it does real psychological work: it makes us feel better. When we feel assaulted, it is easy to feel powerless or slighted. Anger seems to restore a power that was taken away by some hurt. Anger is a sense of justice that has gone haywire. We see only the way we are wronged and we become blind to the humanity of other people. We no longer see them as fully human but only as someone who harms or frightens us. Anger makes us feel as though they have no story that might account for what they did. They have no right to mercy or compassion. We see the world as if we are at the center and we have been wronged. Nothing seems to exist but the wrong done to us: we become nothing but our pain at being wronged and our desire to make whoever wronged us suffer. Even if the anger is trivial, at the moment it burns in us we are the only real people in the universe and our hurt is the only real problem. In this state of mind the injustice done to us feels more important than the fact that someone in another part of the city or world is starving or brutalized or sold into sexual slavery. Nothing matters to us nearly as much as our own little wounds. Because our wound so dominates our awareness, we are filled with a desire to harm or at least imagine harming whoever annoyed us. If they suffered, my suffering would stop. Their suffering would restore the proper balance to the world. When we are angry it seems reasonable to hope that someone who cuts us off in traffic would be in a wreck, even though this is disproportionate suffering for an inconsequential irritation.

Sometimes anger is important. It can protect us from harm by energizing us for self-defense or the work of

justice. This is one of its primary meanings in the Bible. Anger becomes a vice when it expresses an inordinate desire for vengeance and recrimination. When this happens, it no longer cares about justice but isolates us from other people and even from our better impulses. Anger as a vice is like a drug that consoles us when we feel hurt or powerless, and like a drug it can become addictive. The more we indulge in it, the more impossible it is to love one another.

From the earliest list of vices through the Middle Ages and up to the present day, anger always has made the hit parade of deadly sins. This is because it is understood in the Christian moral tradition not as a particularly bad sin but as a root of sin. It is not a moral failure; it is a habit, an emotional disposition that produces harsh speech, intolerance, violence, and murder. An individual flare-up of anger might seem harmless, but it trains the heart to magnify insults and to console oneself with the wish to harm those who annoy. This emotional habit is called “deadly” because it is at its root a sin against love. This connection between anger and the mutilation of our power to love is why it is, especially in the Roman Catholic tradition, understood as something that deprives us of grace. In its fullest form, anger is always a sin against charity; it separates us from the love of God and neighbor.

## Patience: Mercy or Resignation?

Each vice is matched with a virtue that serves as its antidote. Patience is not just a nice action; it is the medicine that heals anger. It is the power to transform a situation so it is no longer dominated by sin. Patience sometimes means something namby-pamby, an insistence that we passively accept evil treatment. But Christians have traditionally understood it as mercy and forbearance that dissolve anger. When people irritate us at work, instead of immediately charging into how unreasonable they are, patience takes a breath. It thinks about why they might act this way. It considers whether they have a point. It uses a kind of spiritual jujitsu against someone and offers back good humor or kindness. Instead of inflaming a difficult situation, patience brings light and understanding.

When a more difficult injustice has occurred, patience counters anger with mercy. In this context, mercy means wishing someone well even if they have harmed you. Sometimes it is important for people to experience

consequences for what they have done or at least be prevented from continuing to ruin people's lives with violence or hostility. Patience is a virtue; it is power; it is not stupidity. Mercy means wishing well for everyone. Even when the most important thing is getting to safety, one can pray that good comes to the one who is harming you. "Good" does not mean they thrive in their evil deeds but that the grace and mercy of God would heal them. You can pray for those who do you harm, sincerely, because if they are healed they will not be so dangerous.

Patience in this sense neither passively accepts anger nor responds with anger. Both of these approaches simply give to sin more power. They are not antidotes to anger but repetitions of it. Forbearance responds to difficulty by bringing the power of love and mercy into a charged situation. As a power, it displaces the distorted energy of anger. It recognizes in a difficult situation that the other person is also a child of God. The practice of patience seeks to undo anger with good. It dissolves the anger so a situation charged with sin and violence (emotional or physical) becomes transformed.

Each virtue has a "near enemy," an emotional habit that looks like a virtue but is an imposter. Patience's near enemy is "being nice." Patience is not being a doormat. It is not accepting cruel treatment without complaining. It is not tolerating injustice to oneself or anyone else because Christians are supposed to be "nice." If we think about how Jesus tore up the temple and called out religious leaders he thought were self-righteous or unfair, we realize that being "nice" is not a spiritual power that helps us to love one another. When we look to what Jesus did, we see love is not passivity but a powerful force.

Sometimes women in abusive marriages are advised to be "patient" and quietly endure violence. Martin Luther King Jr. criticized moderate Christians for insisting that African Americans should accept racist laws such as Jim Crow laws with patience. This is not true patience. An antidote to a vice does not give it permission to persist.

Patience is one of the most difficult virtues to practice because it invites us to live into a situation that is difficult and perhaps even dangerous with love and mercy rather than anger.

The idea of virtue is that we can train like spiritual athletes. We have the power to love even in difficult situations. It is difficult because it requires a great deal of courage. It requires that we are merciful without being passive. It is difficult, so we have to train and practice. Perhaps this is where grace comes in. Grace not only empowers us to be virtuous. It also enables us to live with our imperfections without falling into guilt or despair.

## Vices, Virtues, and the Grace of God

The idea of virtues and vices has been an important part of ethical training of Christians. Martin Luther's despair of ever fulfilling the requirements of virtue awoke him to the graciousness of divine love that always surrounds us. Even in our sin we are still loved. Perhaps both of these ideas are important for Christians to think about. The contrast between anger and patience reminds us that we should pay attention to the inner workings of our emotions. When we notice we are controlled by anger, we can bring in the power of patience and mercy to defuse it. At the same time, we can remember the graciousness of God and put aside anxiety that we have to become perfect before God can love us.

## About the Writer

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## Endnotes

1. Don W. King, "Narnia and the Seven Deadly Sins," <http://cslewis.drzeus.net/papers/7sins.html>.
2. Lindsay Totty, "Your Turn: Gilligan," [http://www.npr.org/blogs/incharacter/2008/01/your\\_turn\\_gilligan.html](http://www.npr.org/blogs/incharacter/2008/01/your_turn_gilligan.html). There are many Web sites exploring this idea.