

The Capital Sin of Anger

IS MELVIN THERE?

A young girl who was writing a paper for school came to her father and asked, "Dad, what is the difference between anger and exasperation?" The father replied, "It is mostly a matter of degree. Let me show you what I mean." With that the father went to the telephone and dialed a number at random. To the man who answered the phone, he said, "Hello, is Melvin there?" The man answered, "There's no one living here named Melvin. You must have the wrong number." The father dialed the number again. "Hello, is Melvin there?" "Now look here!" came the heated reply. "You just called this number and I told you that there is no Melvin here! You've got a lot of nerve calling again!" The receiver slammed down hard. The father turned to his daughter and said, "You see, that was anger. Now I'll show you what exasperation means." He dialed the same number, and when a violent voice roared, "Hello!" the father calmly said, "Hello, this is Melvin. Have there been any calls for me?"

THE CAPITAL SIN OF ANGER

It doesn't seem like it takes much to get us angry. Our mood can quickly turn from sunny to sour just because of one phone call... or two or three. One minute we can be happy, the next minute we can be mad. Today's celebration demonstrates the unpredictability of our moods. It is quite possible that Palm Sunday gives us the best view of anger offered by the Church's liturgical calendar. It beautifully contrasts the range of emotions that we find in our hearts.

We began the Mass with the reading from the Gospel of Mark, where Jesus is welcomed into Jerusalem amid shouts of joy and anticipation, "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!" (Mark 11:1-10). Just moments ago, during the Passion Narrative, we heard the anger of the crowd as they shouted, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" (Mark 15:13-14).

While a part of us is dismayed by the angry response of the crowd, a part of us understands just how easy it is to be swept away by anger when things don't go our way. The Jews had hoped that Jesus would be their Messiah, the one who would over-throw the Roman Empire and be their new king. But they were disappointed. Jesus demonstrated a great amount of power and authority, but he didn't seem interested in using that power and authority to free the Jews from the burden of Roman rule. This, coupled with the incitement of the Pharisees, made the people very angry.

The capital sin of anger is rooted in our desire to have things done perfectly, according to what we consider perfect. It is the need for ourselves, others, and situations to be faultless. Like the popular Burger King mantra, anger frequently tells us what we deserve, saying, "Have it your way, right away!" Anger fails to understand our proper place as God's children, by placing our will over His will. It often leads us to feeling "cheated" by turning our attention away from the virtues of patience and humility.

THE TWO TYPES OF ANGER

It is false to say that all anger is a sin. There are two types of anger, one is a sin and the other is not. The reason all anger cannot be a sin is because anger is, first and foremost, an emotion, and emotions are gifts from God. Emotions tell us a lot about what God wants to heal in us and how God wants us to respond to the things going on in our lives and in the world. Some people have suggested that anger is only a sin when we act on it. This too is false. What makes the emotion of anger a sin is self-righteousness.

Righteous anger comes from God. It is an emotion that tells us that something has been done that is against the desire and will of God. It may give us the conviction we need to say or do what God wants from us. The proof of this type of anger can be found in Jesus Christ. We know that Jesus is without sin, and yet he occasionally got angry with people. In the Gospel of Mark, we hear of Jesus' anger with those who questioned whether or not he should be healing people on the Sabbath. Jesus asked the crowd, "Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?" (Mark 3:4). When no one answered, "he looked around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart" (Mark 3:5).

Not only do we have Scriptural proof of Jesus' righteous anger, but we also see how his anger sometimes urged him into action. The best example of this is the anger he expressed toward the moneychangers he found in the temple.

"The Passover of the Jews was at hand, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple he found those who were selling oxen and sheep and pigeons, and the moneychangers at their business. And making a whip of cords, he drove them all, with the sheep and oxen, out of the temple; and he poured out the coins of the moneychangers and overturned their tables. And he told those who sold the pigeons, "Take these things away; you shall not make my Father's house a house of trade" (John 2:13-16).

There are times when you and I experience righteous anger—anger that comes from something happening that is opposed to God's will. There are even times when you and I are urged, like Jesus, to act on that anger in expressing God's will in a given situation. This, of course, must always be done because God has asked it of us and it must be done in humility.

More often than not, our anger is not righteous anger, but self-righteous anger. And it is this type of anger that is a sin. Self-righteous anger is egocentric, or selfish. It is not concerned with God's will, but our own will. This most often occurs when we don't get what we want, or when others don't do what we want them to. A perfect example of this is road rage. This modern phenomenon is based on the belief that "I" am the perfect driver and "everyone else" is idiotically imperfect. It is with this mentality that you and I find ourselves driving up behind someone who's in the left lane of the interstate and becoming angry when they don't immediately move into the right lane. We tell ourselves, maybe even out loud, that the idiot driving the car in front of us must not be able to read the signs along the interstate that say, "slower cars use right lane." Moments later, however, we can find ourselves in the fast lane with someone else bearing down on *our* bumper, wanting *us* to merge to the right. We continue driving in the left lane and get angry with the idiot riding our tail, who obviously cannot read the speed limit signs! Do you see my point? Self-righteous anger has nothing to do with what's "right" or "wrong," but with what *I* want and what *I* think is correct.

There are plenty of Scriptural examples of this type of anger. One of them is in the Book of Daniel. In this story, King Nebuchadnezzar wants Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego to worship his false god. He asks them, “is it true that you do not serve my gods or worship the golden image which I have set up? If you do not worship, you shall immediately be cast into a burning fiery furnace” (Daniel 3:14-15). The three young men don’t worship the king’s false god and he angrily throws them into the fire. King Nebuchadnezzar wasn’t interested in what was right or wrong, but in having others do what he wanted them to do. Self-righteous anger is all about us, and having everything our way.

THE MANIFESTATIONS OF ANGER¹

When we don’t allow God to heal our anger, it can manifest itself in many ways. Some of the most common manifestations of anger are resentment, wrath, mockery, negativity, sarcasm, sadness/depression, rebellion, impatience, and unbelief.

- 1) Seized Anger: Sometimes we clutch anger in an emotional bear hug. We don’t want to let go of it. This is most often the case when the anger we feel was caused by someone else’s sin, such as abuse or neglect. When we seize anger and won’t let go, it leads to resentment. And the only things worse than meeting an angry person, is meeting a resentful person!
- 2) Wrath: Wrath is best defined as self-righteous anger in action. This is one of the qualities of Satan himself. In the Book of Revelation, there are a couple of references to Satan’s wrath. One verse explains that, “the dragon [Satan] was angry with the woman, and went off to make war on the rest of her offspring, on those who keep the commandments of God and bear testimony to Jesus” (Revelation 12 17). The reason for his wrath is also explained. “O earth and sea... the devil has come down to you in wrath, because he knows that his time is short!” (Revelation 12:12).
- 3) Mockery/Negativity/Sarcasm: These three manifestations are all rightly called repressed expressions of anger. They can sometimes be very subtle and covert. We see these manifestations in the Bible in many places. Jesus encountered them often, especially in his Passion².
- 4) Sadness/Depression: This manifestation of anger is most common in those who are not very in touch with their feelings. They may not even know why they are sad or depressed. They may look for ways to overcome sadness and miss the opportunity to let God heal the anger that’s in their heart.
- 5) Giddiness and Smiling: Seemingly the opposite of sadness and depression, these manifestations of anger provide a great cover for us. We put on the façade of happiness, smiling and laughing, when it’s really a diversion from our anger.
- 6) Rebellion: The Israelites in the Old Testament are wonderful examples of this type of anger. They were constantly becoming angry with God

¹ From this point on, all references to anger will be referring to self-righteous anger unless noted otherwise.

² Matthew 27:39-43 “And those who passed by derided him, wagging their heads and saying, “You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross.” So also the chief priests, with the scribes and elders, mocked him, saying, “He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him. He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he desires him; for he said, ‘I am the Son of God.’”

because He was not doing what *they* wanted Him to do. Their anger, more often than not, led to their rebellion. They would start off complaining against God, and eventually their anger would lead them to worship false idols.

- 7) Impatience: This is always a sign of anger. Impatience is our anger about a situation or a person not moving as quickly as we want it to move.
- 8) Unbelief: Most of the people who come to my office and tell me that they are unsure whether or not they believe in God anymore, really aren't questioning their faith, they are struggling with anger. They wonder if God cares anymore, because they are angry about why certain things have happened. Anger can make us question our belief in God.

OVERCOMING ANGER

God does not want us to have to live with anger.³ He desires for us to live in peace. It is only when we are living in peace that we can fully bring His message of peace and love to the world. Saint Thomas A Kempis wrote, "Be peaceful yourself, and you will be able to bring peace to others. A man of peace does more good than a very learned man."⁴

In order to do this, we must grow in forgiveness and forbearance. Which means, we must be willing to go to the cross with Jesus Christ. We must be willing to offer the same prayer that Jesus offered as he hung upon the cross, "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34). This proclamation from Christ, spoken in the suffering of his Passion, is the perfect example of forgiveness and forbearance. Saint Thomas A Kempis explains the fruits of such peacefulness when he states, "all of our peace in this present life should depend on humble forbearance rather than on absence of adversity. He who knows the secret of endurance will enjoy the greatest peace. Such a one is conqueror of self, master of the world, a friend of Christ, and an heir of Heaven."⁵

Whether it is God calling, or Melvin, we are challenge to respond the same--

"Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for edifying, as fits the occasion, that it may impart grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, in whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you" (Ephesians 4:29-32).

³ Ephesians 4:26-27, "Do not let the sun go down on your anger."

⁴ The Imitation of Christ, Thomas A Kempis, pg. 70.

⁵ The Imitation of Christ, Thomas A Kempis, pg. 71.