

Trinity VI

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“Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time:
Thou shalt not kill.”

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.
Amen.

It seems to me that if there is one emotion that characterizes modern society, it is anger. Anger at politicians, anger at the economy, anger at social injustice, anger at that incompetent driver who wouldn't get out of my way this morning. If you don't believe me, turn on the news or take a scroll through Twitter. We are an angry people. The Jews in our Lord's time were also an angry people—after centuries of persecution and exploitation by Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, and Romans, first-century Palestine was a powder keg, ready to explode in unbridled violence against their oppressors.

“Ye have heard that it was said, thou shalt not kill.” Indeed they had heard that, as it was the divinely revealed Law of God, the sixth commandment given to Moses; of which the Pharisees and the Scribes were the authoritative guardians and interpreters. And here, preaching from a mountain much like Moses before him, he who came not to abolish, but to fulfill, the Law, says: “Thou shalt not kill; *But* I say unto you, That whosoever is angry with his

brother shall be in danger of the judgement: and whosoever shall say to his brother, Raca, shall be in danger of the council: but whosoever shall say, Thou fool, shall be in danger of hell fire.” This was a revolutionary statement. For the Jews, faithfulness to the Law was mainly a matter of external action and piety—but here our Lord—exercising his divine prerogative as the true Lawgiver—intensifies and internalizes the commandment by going straight to the root cause of killing: the passion of anger.

The goal of the Christian life can best be summarized by Christ’s command—given later in this same Sermon on the Mount—to “be perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.” A tall order, but one Christ would not expect of us were true perfection impossible. This perfection involves a transformation of the heart—what in Greek is called *metanoia*, a complete changing of one’s mind and soul—made possible by our cooperation with God’s grace; by which we become conformed to the image and likeness of Jesus. It is *salvation* in the proper sense of that word: a restoration to complete spiritual *health* and *wholeness*. The Christian struggle is primarily an interior struggle against what we call the *passions*: those uncontrolled desires that emerge from the unruly wills, disordered affections, and misdirected energies of our fallen nature. The passions are a sickness that spring from self-centeredness and egotism, and there are seven of them: lust, gluttony, greed, sloth, anger, envy, and pride.

In our Lord's warning against anger, he teaches us the progression of each of these passions in our souls. First, they begin as a suggestion, a mere thought: Perhaps someone expresses an opinion that is different than my own; to which my prideful ego reacts, falsely suggesting that this person must be against me in some way, triggering feelings of anger in the mind. This is the critical moment. I can either choose to put off the feeling of anger, or I can turn my consideration to it, I can entertain it. But the moment I give this feeling of anger any attention, I have already lost. Resentment begins to grow. Our Lord warns that those who entertain anger in this way will be liable for the *judgement*. This judgment to which he refers was something called the Tribunal of the Little Sanhedrin—it was a law court found in local districts throughout Israel, tasked with prosecuting petty crimes and misdemeanors; the sorts of offenses that, if left unpenalized, quickly advance to more serious transgressions.

Latent anger that is not immediately surrendered to the healing grace of God, will find expression. The word Christ uses to denote this is the Aramaic term *raca*—it is an interjection, a spontaneous expression of contempt. It is anger boiling over into wrath.

Continuing his analogy, Our Lord tells us that anger which has reached this point is worthy of the *council*—what was known as the Greater Sanhedrin, which sat in Jerusalem and judged the

weightier matters of the law. This was the court which sentenced Christ to death. The message is straightforward: when we direct wrath towards our brother or sister, we are treating them as though they do not bear the priceless Image of God; we abdicate our reason and dehumanize our fellow man. We crucify Christ in them. At this point, we have consciously united our will to the passion of anger, giving free consent to its power in us. It has taken over our hearts and our minds, deceiving us, and providing an entrance for the demons who seek to control us through our sinful passions. But there yet remains one further step.

“Whosoever shall say, Thou fool, shall be in danger of hell fire.” This word “fool” has a specific Biblical meaning. We know it from Psalm 14: “The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God.” To call someone a fool is to accuse that person of apostasy—of open rebellion against God, worthy of destruction. It is an assertion that I, in my anger, have the right to judge you with the judgment of God—it is the total triumph of pride in the heart. The punishment Our Lord warns will follow on this final stage of anger is the most heinous thing his audience could have imagined: not “hell fire” as many of our modern English Bibles inaccurately translate, but the “fires of Gehenna”.

Gehenna, or the Valley of Hinnom, surrounds Jerusalem to the southwest of the city. In Christ’s day, it was the city dump, where fires continually burned the trash and dead bodies thrown

therein. But the history of Gehenna was far darker. For it was in this valley where King Solomon, concerned more with pleasing his wives than remaining loyal to his God, allowed the worship of the demon Moloch to be introduced amongst the Jews. Every day, a fire would be kindled before the great idol of Moloch in the valley of Gehenna, and those Jews who wished to court the idol's favour would bring forth their infant children, to cast them into the flames, a ritual holocaust to a satanic god. It was because of this practice that the prophets attributed the division of Israel and the fall of the Davidic kingdom. So when our Lord warns us that anger, fully expressed, will be punished with the fires of Gehenna, he is in effect saying: as your forefathers embraced idolatry, injustice, and infidelity that led to the killing of their children and the destruction of their nation; so, too, will your embrace of anger consume and destroy not only you, but everyone around you. If anger goes unchecked in the heart, it grows to verbal abuse, then physical abuse, and then, God forbid, murder. This is the connection our Lord wants us to make.

Anger is deadly not only because of its power to destroy our lives, but because of the deception that accompanies it. When we yield to anger, we often find ourselves attempting to rationalize it: either by claiming it is for a just cause—so-called “righteous anger”—or by tricking ourselves into thinking that God himself becomes angry as we do.

The hard truth is, that for the one who has not yet been made perfect in love, any presumption of justified anger runs the risk of self-deceit. It is godly and fitting to feel righteous indignation at evil, but the corruptive effects of sin in our souls more often than not render us incapable of rightly judging our own motives. There is only one distinction between sinful anger and righteous anger: malice. If there is malice in our anger for any reason at all, it is sinful by definition, and it does not matter what caused this anger in us. When a man is angry with malice, he always sins, no matter how plausible the pretext: being swindled in a store, medical malpractice, or even theft in a church. St. James warns us: “the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God.”

But the greater and more dangerous deceit is attempting to justify our anger by attributing a like anger or wrath to Our Lord. God is without passions, entirely unchanging, “with whom is no variableness,” “the same yesterday, and to day, and for ever.” God’s entire disposition towards us is love: “for I know the thoughts that I think toward you, saith the Lord, thoughts of peace, and not of evil.” The wrath of God is nothing other than our subjective experience of the destructive consequences of our sins. God is never angry or vengeful, but he does allow suffering in our lives just as a doctor treating a patient may cause pain in order to cure a disease. Healing the soul often requires disturbing our settled ways of seeing ourselves and the people around us. Though painful,

these shocks shake us free from our passion-driven delusions; they enable us to regain a right mind, and thus return to spiritual health. By conquering our disordered passions, we cleave to God; but by becoming enslaved to them, we make him our enemy. It is not that God grows angry, but rather that our sins obscure and frustrate the work of Grace in us. To say that God turns away in anger from the wicked is like saying that the sun hides itself from the blind.

So what is the cure for anger? Love. “Love is patient and kind; it is not arrogant or rude; love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful.” “Love your enemies,” says our Lord, “bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you.” St. Silouan of Mt. Athos said, “If you do not love your enemies, then you do not know God.” We love our enemies precisely when we pray and work for their well-being, when we forgive without condition, without exception, and without delay. This does not mean that we will suddenly feel warmth and affection towards the offender; but it does mean that we sincerely ask God to bless the one who has wronged us with the same blessing we wish for ourselves—including the blessing of repentance for sins. St. Paul says, “I will that men pray every where, lifting up holy hands, without wrath.” St. Therese of Lisieux advises us: “When you are angry with someone, the way to find peace is to pray for that

person and ask God to reward him for making you suffer.” Prayer pacifies the passions, and frees us from the self-centeredness of anger.

In addition to love, we must practice silence. “Let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger.” “A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.” Silence suffocates anger. This is not only a silence of the lips, but a silence of the heart. It is an inner stillness that rests in the confidence of knowing that “he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it”. The Fathers refer to this as *apatheia*—a peacefulness and stability of soul that is no longer disturbed and tossed about by the passions. “Acquire the Spirit of Peace, and a thousand souls around you will be saved.” “Be still, and know that I am God”.

Many centuries ago, a young monk visited the desert father Isidore, a priest and abbot renowned for his holiness of life. “Abba,” said the young monk to Fr. Isidore, “why are the demons so frightened of you?” The elder replied: “Since the day I became a monk, I have never allowed anger to reach my lips.”

Amen.