

# The **Vice** That Resists Redemption

When anger consumes us, there is no justice.

In December of 1955, Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King Jr., Ralph Abernathy, and the citizens of Montgomery, Alabama, boycotted the city's bus lines to protest the rampant segregation and oppression of blacks in the city. In his autobiographical account of the events, *Stride Toward Freedom*, King describes those crucial first days of the boycott, when the tensions of hope and apprehension permeated the deliberations of the protestors and city officials alike. On December 18, less than two weeks after the boycott began, King went to the city council to speak on behalf of the black delegation, hopeful that an early solution might be reached. Upon entering the meeting, however, he quickly noticed that among the city officials were members of the racist White Citizens Council. King spoke out, only to be publicly defamed by the council itself. The white city council pulled out of the negotiations, and the hope for an early solution was dashed. The boycott would last another year.

King returned home that night with a "heavy heart. I was weighted down by a terrible sense of guilt, remember that on two or three occasions I had

allowed myself to become angry and indignant.... 'You must not harbor anger,' I admonished myself. 'You must be willing to suffer the anger of the opponent, and yet not return anger.'"

Throughout his ministry for justice, King would speak again and again about his struggles with anger: "The discontent is so deep, the anger so ingrained, the despair, the restlessness so wide, that something has to be brought into being to serve as a channel through which these deep emotional feelings, these deep angry feelings, can be funneled.... I see this campaign [of nonviolent resistance] as a way to transmute the inchoate rage of the ghetto into a constructive and creative channel."

King's saintly courage amidst hatred raises a question for us. In a world where injustice too often gets the upper hand, where the little rain that falls on the fields of the just gets so easily diverted to the already rich top soils of the unjust, why shouldn't those who are oppressed lash out in anger against their oppressors? How else do the abused and disenfranchised resist the powerful, except with power? Anger feels like power. Anger

feels like righteousness. It often feels like justice itself.

But it isn't, and the practically wise person understands the crucial difference between a virtue and its perversion into a vice. In this month's installment on the seven deadly sins and the seven holy virtues, we examine our final pairing: anger and justice.

The Christian tradition has been rather divided about anger since the very beginning. In biblical accounts it is not always easy to get a clear picture of anger as a vice when we are reminded to fear the wrath of God in one passage and to resist anger in another. In his recent book on the vice, titled *Anger*, Robert Thurman notes that in the Old Testament, "the angriest person around seems to be God himself." From the curses God sets upon Adam, Eve, and Cain, to cleansing the corrupt earth with a flood, to hardening Pharaoh's heart, to killing the Egyptian first-borns, God gets angry at humans again and again. And yet we also read throughout the Scriptures—in the Psalms, Proverbs, in Paul's letters, and from Christ himself—exhortations



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against anger.

Despite this difficulty, anger has been on the list of seven deadly sins since its inception among the monastic desert fathers. As peaceful as a monk's life might appear, the temptation to cultivate anger in the soul was a very real threat to those early ascetics. The fourth-century Christian monk Evagrius advises, "Everything you do to avenge yourself against your brother who has wronged you will become a stumbling block to you in

the time of prayer....When you are praying as you should, such things will come over you that you may think it utterly just to resort to anger, but there is absolutely no such thing as just anger against your neighbor."

One is tempted to respond, "Really? Absolutely no such thing as just anger? Now that seems outright wrongheaded, and without compassion for the significant sufferings of some in this world." Before writing the early Christian fathers off, however,

let us first identify what we actually mean by anger.

Broadly speaking, we can note three kinds of anger: anger as an emotion, anger as a vice occasioned by a particular event or person, and anger as the culmination of all other vices. Each has its own relation to the virtue of justice.

As a mere emotion, or *passion* as

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theologians would name it, anger entails the agitation aroused occasionally by the insults, slights, and injustices we experience. Such emotions wax and wane according to the particularities of personalities and the severity of the offenses endured. Aristotle, the pagan Greek father of virtue ethics whose categories were baptized into Christian thinking through medieval theologians, notes that anger as an emotion is neither a virtue nor a vice. A virtue or vice is a settled disposition toward our emotional life that encourages (in the case of virtue)

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or discourages (in the case of vice) praiseworthy actions. The virtuous person would be expected to experience anger in the face of injustice, but she would be oriented toward it in the appropriate way, in response to the appropriate offense, to an appropriate degree, for the appropriate amount of time. In the Christian moral tradition, anger as an emotion is precisely the appropriate response to injustice and entails the recognition that someone has been wronged.

Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung in her book *Glittering Vices* thus notes that Christ models the full range of sinless emotions, from sorrow to anger to elation. Apathy is no virtue but neither is rage. In this regard, we might say that while some are guilty for becoming enraged at trivial slights, others are guilty of indifference in the face of tremendous injustices.

**W**e may offer an initial, yet simple, definition of justice to make our point about anger more clearly. Justice is the virtue that inclines us to live in right relationship to other people, wherein individuals can covenant together not only fairly but in a way that fosters shalom. In a fallen world, justice is fundamentally restorative of our relationships gone awry. But as a

vice, anger is a disordered disposition, cultivated over time through habit, which resists the work of justice itself because it becomes consumed with *vengeance*. This can happen in two ways. First, vicious anger resists justice by being angry for the right reason but in the wrong way. Justice, simply put, is the righting of wrongs, the restoration of righteousness among the people of God. Vengeance might seem like the means to right a wrong, but not so in the Christian tradition. In order to get clear on this, we need to see the meaning of justice as a virtue

of the people of God that only makes sense in the context of the ongoing work of grace and redemption through Christ. As a vice, then, anger resists the redemptive and restorative work of Christ.

Consider again our opening illustration, which recounts the justified anger of African Americans who were deeply wronged. Imagine other scenarios of injustice: a Jew in 1938 Germany, an Anabaptist in the sixteenth century, a woman in an abusive marriage, a person who has been wrongfully defamed or imprisoned. Given the depth of the offense, is there any limit on the anger that should be poured out against the oppressor?

While I can never presume to speak for one who has endured such depths of suffering or borne the direct weight of such injustice, I can look to the meaning of justice offered by the Christian tradition as a restorative and redemptive movement that seeks to work through the emotion of anger toward reconciliation. The work of justice is virtuous to the extent that it doesn't let anger get the upper hand on its movement toward ultimate restoration.

But anger *does* sometimes get the upper hand when it nurtures a sharp and pointed desire for vengeance, and a fixation on wishing outright harm

upon the wrongdoer. Such anger crowds the soul and takes up so much space in the inner life that goodness and justice cannot work their right course. The fourth-century monk and ascetic Cassian describes this kind of anger as a blindness: "For any reason whatsoever the movement of wrath may boil over and blind the eyes of the heart, obstructing the vision of [another's sin] with the deadly beam of a more vehement illness [our own sin] and not allowing the sun of righteousness to be seen."

As a virtue that shapes the human heart against vice, justice works in the opposite direction from vicious anger. For a richer perspective on this, I recommend reading Croatian theologian Miroslav Volf's remembrance of his interrogations by the Communist regime in Yugoslavia in the mid-1980s. His account of the violence he endured in these interrogations, and his subsequent theological analysis of what it means to remember injustice rightly can be found in his book *The End of Memory: Remembering Rightly in a Violent World*. Far from minimizing the injustice he suffered at his interrogator's hand, Volf nevertheless asks, "What effect does remembering Christ's Passion have on how we as wronged people remember wrongdoers and our relationship to them?"

Volf claims that the Passion of Christ requires us to recognize that the grace of God is poured out upon the wronged and the wrongdoer alike. "Christ died for the ungodly," Paul preaches in Romans 5:6. By remembering the Passion of Christ in the midst of justified emotional anger over injustice, we can begin to imagine—only through Christ—how wrongdoers might be remembered as forgiven and as freed from their own vices.

Second, remembering the Passion of Christ calls us to honor victims while extending grace to the perpetrators of injustice. Only Christ models perfectly what we can struggle to

emulate—*both* the truthful condemnation of the offense that protects the suffering, and the gracious return of the offenders to themselves “as children of God.”

Third, the memory of the Passion offers a way by which reconciliation can occur, even if only partially this side of the eschaton, through genuine repentance on the part of the wrongdoer and forgiveness on the part of the wronged. Volf offers this hope: “The memory of the Passion anticipates the resurrection from death to new life for both the wronged and wrongdoers...the Passion memory anticipates as well the *formation of a reconciled community even out of deadly enemies.*”

**T**here is, however, a second and deeper manifestation of anger as a vice that is more difficult to reconcile and counter with justice or right remembrance. The first form of anger is being angry for the right reason but becoming consumed with the memory of the wrong to such a degree that one is blinded to all options save vengeance. The second form of anger arises not out of an otherwise good person who fails to move past a traumatic offense, but from a culmination of other vices built up within the individual.

In this way, anger can be experienced as the final stop on the soul’s road through the vices. Consider this path of a soul’s descent. As the root of all vice, the vice of pride comes first. Pride (the turning away from God and toward the self) leads to allowances for sloth (or spiritual apathy and ingratitude toward the divine gifts), which leads to allowances for gluttony or for lust (desires that seek to cheaply replace sloth’s despair) which, when universalized, easily leads to greed (a gathering of all desires to the self), which provokes the envy of others (since others appear to get what the greedy desire, but can’t seem to get for themselves) which, when left to fester over time, fuels anger

(a bitterness toward others for the goodness they enjoy, and accompanying desire for vengeance). Anger as a culmination of vices is angry both for the wrong reason, since even its own desires are warped, and in the wrong way. In this regard, the truly angry person is perhaps most resistant to grace and blind to the light.

In conclusion, we can say that justice is the virtue of communities and individuals who, through the grace of Christ and rightful truth-telling, participate in the reconciling work of the cross amidst our corporate and personal injustices. In this respect, justice counters the vengeances of vicious anger.

But the world is fallen, and anger does consume individuals and communities. Whatever its path, when vice builds upon vice, and the resistance to a forgiving and loving God is truly entrenched in the soul, the preached words of reconciliation and redemption fall on a hard soil. There may indeed be hardened souls, souls that even the corporate work of justice and reconciliation can barely penetrate, if at all, in this life. In such difficult cases, however, we would do well to remember that justice is only a virtue and not God. Thus, we will end our series next month with the virtue that is also the name of God—love. ■

## For further reading

*Anger*, by Robert Thurman

*A Black Theology of Liberation*, by James Cone

*The End of Memory: Remembering Rightly in a Violent World*, by Miroslav Volf

*The Little Book of Biblical Justice*, by Chris Marshall

*We Drink from Our Own Wells: The Spiritual Journey of a People*, by Gustavo Gutiérrez