

Wrath

Like lust and gluttony, the next capital vice, wrath, sins against temperance. Passion per se is not the problem—only preoccupation with it (sloth) or inappropriate pursuit of appropriate objects (lust and gluttony) or pursuit of inappropriate objects (avarice: money as an end in itself). Similarly, wrath stems from a passion for justice activated by perceived injustice, which may be real—in which case the problem is a disproportionate response—or unreal. Theological debate continues regarding whether, in cases of genuine injustice, some anger is a legitimate passion or whether any anger is automatically a vice. Ephesians 4:26-27 supports the case for righteous anger: "Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil." Still, aside from reaching a position in principle, the practical difficulty would involve knowing the when and how of appropriate anger. Rather than primarily analyzing whether anger is sinful when it arises, we should probably focus on moderating its occurrence and effects. There is biblical support for this practical approach: A quick scan of a biblical concordance yields a dozen passages, most of them from Proverbs, giving counsel about anger. Interestingly, none of these mentions a single word about the object of our anger. The passages on anger's rightful expression can be briefly summarized in the advice, 'Cool it.'

Violence. To begin our examination of Proverbs, then, are passages treating the violence that often stems from wrath. As mentioned before, this is sometimes a means of obtaining riches (11:16). Yet in other cases it almost becomes a desired end in itself (e.g., 13:2; 24:1-2). The wicked may be violent out of hatred for the righteous (29:10). Frequently they entice their neighbors (16:29), with ambush used as a metaphor for their words (12:6). Twice we are told that "the mouth of the

wicked conceals violence" (10:6, 11). However, in the end "the violence of the wicked will sweep them away, / because they refuse to do what is just" (21:7); they may wind up as fugitives (28:17).

Strife. Violence may not be physical, operating metaphorically in terms of strife. "Hatred stirs up strife" (10:12); so too, "a harsh word stirs up anger" (15:1). Some texts focus on instigators into which even the wise can occasionally fall—hatred, harsh words, and the like. But these instigators do not characterize wise people, and several texts focus instead on those who are characterized by folly, often using the image of starting a fire: hot-tempered (15:18a), perverse (16:28), scoffer (22:10; 29:8), gossip (16:28; 26:20-21), greedy (28:25a), and godless (11:9). It should be sobering to realize that indulging wrath quickly places a person among the characteristically foolish (20:3). Therefore, "the beginning of strife is like letting out water; / so stop before the quarrel breaks out" (17:14). Moreover, "like somebody who takes a passing dog by the ears is one who meddles in the quarrel of another" (26:17). Lovers of strife and lovers of transgression overlap (17:19). The consequences can be disastrous: "An ally offended is stronger than a city; such quarreling is like the bars of a castle" (18:19). On a more mundane, though no less relevant, level: "It is better to live in a corner of the housetop / than in a house shared with a contentious wife" (21:9; also 21:19; 25:24). How does one avoid strife? "Love covers all offenses" (10:12); "A soft answer turns away wrath" (15:1); "Those who are slow to anger calm contention" (15:18). Finally, "whoever trusts in the LORD will be enriched" (28:25)—in contrast to the greedy person stirring up strife.

Slander. Already identified among instigators of strife, and reinforcing these themes, is slander: "Do not be a witness against your neighbor without cause, / and

do not deceive with your lips. Do not say, 'I will do to others as they have done to me; I will pay them back for what they have done'" (24:28-29). Though false witness against a neighbor seems like an effective weapon (25:18), actually "like a sparrow in its flitting, like a swallow in its flying, an undeserved curse goes nowhere" (26:2). In fact a backbiting tongue produces anger as surely as the north wind brings rain (25:23). In the end, "lying lips conceal hatred, and whoever utters slander is a fool" (10:18).

Retribution. The follies of slander and retribution connect since, according to Jas. 4:11-12, the slanderer usurps God's position as Lawgiver and Judge over others, and God does not delegate retribution to nongovernmental people—even when they are genuinely wronged. "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord" (Rom. 12:19, quoting Deut. 32:35). "Do not say, 'I will repay evil'; / wait for the LORD, and he will help you" (Prov. 20:22). As Paul picks up in Rom. 12:20-21: "If your enemies are hungry, give them bread to eat; / and if they are thirsty, give them water to drink; for you will heap coals of fire on their heads, and the LORD will reward you" (Prov. 25:21-22). Whether or not the apparent shame leads to repentance, meeting the needs of enemies promotes charity. Wrath seems understandable in the face of wrongs undergone, along with the very real vulnerability that wronged people feel. But wrath—even despairing wrath—proudly usurps divine prerogatives while misunderstanding the character of justice. Because God's justice can incorporate mercy along with opportunity for reform, at times it requires considerable patience.

Temper. The broadest opposition in Proverbs to wrath regards a quick temper. "Fools show their anger at once, but the prudent ignore an insult" (12:16); "Rash words bring sword thrusts, but the tongue of the wise brings healing" (12:18);

"One who is quick-tempered acts foolishly, and the schemer is hated" (14:17); "Whoever is slow to anger has great understanding, but one who has a hasty temper exalts folly" (14:29; also 17:27; 29:11); "A violent tempered person will pay the penalty; if you effect a rescue, you will only have to do it again" (19:19); "Make no friends with those given to anger, and do not associate with hotheads, or you may learn their ways and entangle yourself in a snare" (22:24-25; also 22:8); "One given to anger stirs up strife, / and the hothead causes much transgression" (29:22). From a variety of angles, a quick temper frequently correlates with what is unsavory: folly, wounding, scheming, repeat offenses, on and on.

A king's wrath is compared to a lion's growling in 19:12 and 20:2; thus "whoever is wise will appease it" (16:14). Similarly matter of fact is the description of bribery's effectiveness: "A gift in secret averts anger; / and a concealed bribe in the bosom, strong wrath" (21:14). But Proverbs is not happy with these situations: "One who is slow to anger is better than the mighty, / and one whose temper is controlled than one who captures a city" (16:32). The New Testament's preeminent wisdom text places the same high priority on controlling anger: "You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God's righteousness" (Jas. 1:19-20); "How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! And the tongue is a fire" (3:5-6). Meanwhile, "strife," "anger," "quarrels," "dissensions," and "factions" are prominent among "the works of the flesh" opposed to the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:19-21).

Turning to contemporary culture. Why are we so angry? Perhaps it is because our culture espouses pride, standing up for one's rights, and combative competitiveness. Yet among pride's various manifestations is fear as well:

The fear that is born of trusting oneself in pride is opposed to the freedom and peace of trusting God for assurance and love. If we can look only to ourselves for an ally and a source of security when we are threatened, then we would do well to be afraid . . . and angry.

Our bad anger thus shows us to be trying—and failing—to be God. We are wrathful when we can't control things that hurt us and keep them at bay. Our anger is ready to remedy this vulnerability by taking full control of establishing justice in the world and avenging any wrongs against us. Wrath's expression therefore usually involves the assertion of control, even as—ironically enough—we lose control over ourselves when we are angry.

In other words, wrath stems from pride, the opposite of both the fear of the Lord and charity—the beginning and end of wisdom. The God whom we ought to fear is "merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love," according to an oft-repeated Old Testament refrain. Pagans can recognize the destructive effects of anger and, at times throughout history, have admired dispassionate people as prudent. In a contemporary culture that lauds authenticity and self-expression, however, people now throw off such restraint and reveal self-preoccupation more than ever. Glorifying violence in terms of self-defense and revenge, our culture then wonders how other forms of violence—both physical and verbal—can run so rampant. In such a situation, prudence is likely to be tied more tightly than ever to the fear of God, since other incentives toward self-restraint do not obtain.

Discussion Question:

1. What are the possible bad outcomes due to wrath? In what ways could wrath be against God's will?

- a. Wrath brings violence and conflict.
 - b. Wrath may lead to slander.
2. What are your usual triggers of wrath? How do you control your wrath?
 - See the section on Temper.
3. Do you agree with this statement from the author? “In a contemporary culture that lauds authenticity and self-expression, however, people now throw off such restraint and reveal self-preoccupation more than ever.” Do you observe this happening around you?