

## CAN WE TALK ABOUT...WRATH?

Ephesians 4:25–31

August 17, 2025

We live in the age of rage. Social media runs on it, politicians traffic in it, media profits from it. Outrage has become our most reliable societal fuel and economic engine. Candidates raise money by raising the temperature. Algorithms feed the fear and fury that keep us endlessly clicking. Companies promise protection from perceived threats. You must fight fire with fire.

We're swimming in so much fury that it's easy to forget that wrath is still a deadly sin, even as its corrosive power seeps into every corner of life—from the streets of our city to soccer field sidelines, from our homes to the halls of highest power.

The pages of scripture remind us that wrath is more than a *feeling* of anger. It moves beyond righteous indignation, hardening into a desire to harm or dominate others. Wrath turns anger into a weapon. It justifies revenge, fuels violence, breeds hatred.

But, where does wrath begin? It takes many forms, but at its heart the pattern of wrath is familiar and repeated. This week, I heard human rights lawyer Philippe Sands put it simply when asked about the indifference that enables mass atrocities. His answer came in five words: "*It is always about dehumanization*. They're not like us...And therefore, we are free to treat them this way." *It is always about dehumanization*.

Wrath shouts that "those people" are not human, at least not human in the same way that we are human. They are not like us. The ones whose politics we despise, whose faith is not our own. The ones who crossed a border or live in a homeless camp. The ones whose very beliefs unsettle us. Wrath insists that they are not our neighbors; they are not worthy of love. *It's always about dehumanization*.

I've seen how easily the voice of wrath drowns out compassion. In conversations about the challenges of housing in our city, I've heard plenty of anger but not nearly enough of our neighbors' stories. Late on Friday afternoon, I received a text from a friend with a link to a short piece from *Mirror Indy* about the Streets to Home Indy project, the initiative our church helped to launch earlier this summer. I clicked the link, and the piece described how this new initiative is finding homes for people living in the homeless encampment in Fountain Square scheduled to be closed last Friday afternoon. What took my breath away were the words of Heather Drummond, age 45, a woman who had just learned she was getting housing. She said, "It's a miracle. I've been fighting for this for a long time. I'm glad they're finally seeing us for the real people we are." *It's always about dehumanization*.

As Richard Powers wrote in *The Overstory*, "The best arguments in the world will not change a person's mind. The only thing that can do that is a good story." We've witnessed how wrath hardens hearts while stories soften them. How wrath feeds on distortion while story restores humanity. How wrath turns every encounter, every conversation, every debate, into a battle. The goal is not just to win, but to punish our opponents, to humiliate our enemies, to own the other side.

If we will allow it, scripture can show us a better way. In the fourth chapter of Ephesians, we hear Paul's pastoral, practical wisdom, his advice to the church in Ephesus: speak the truth, work honestly, forgive one another as God in Christ has forgiven you. But first, Paul says, you must put away what corrodes: falsehood, bitterness, malice, wrath.

You might know that the practice of baptism in the early Church began with a series of renunciations, where the one

being baptized rejected “the forces of evil” and their power in the world, turned aside from the path that they had once followed to embrace a new life in Christ. Before baptism, renunciation. Before we can take hold of what is good, we must let go, put away, that which weighs us down.

And the conclusion of this section is anger. The word shows up in six ways in one verse. Clearly those early Christians had their own anger problem, and so do we. Ours might be the angriest era in living memory. And perhaps you’ve heard the phrase, “If you are not angry, you are not paying attention.” That’s true. Scripture does not forbid anger. In fact, Paul writes, “Be angry, but do not sin.”

The Old Testament prophets burned with anger against injustice. Jesus overturned the tables of oppression in the temple. And righteous anger still speaks up, “*This must stop. We will not look away.*” But even righteous anger hardens into hatred if we let it sour. Anger must be harnessed for healing, not destruction.

Anger says, “This is wrong and must be made right.” Wrath says, “You are evil and must be destroyed.” Anger marches for justice while wrath demands revenge. Anger seeks repair while wrath aims only for ruin.

Wrath does not just live in the headlines; it shows up in daily life. Not long ago I was rushing to the grocery store on the way home from work. It was hot, I was late, and my gas gauge was below empty. So of course, the parking lot was filled. After one sweep through the lot, I spotted a single empty space, and it was near the door. So, relieved, I quickly pulled in and hopped out of the car. And that’s when I saw—no, first I heard—the other driver. You know the one, who had clearly arrived first, whose turn signal was still blinking, waiting for my spot. She was furious.irate. Honking her horn, shouting out the window, and gesturing in my direction (not a wave).

I kept moving toward the door of the store. Then, I looked over my shoulder, and I saw her coming toward me. For a moment I froze. I considered my speed and thought about running. I’m not sure why, but something made me turn back instead and approach the woman. “I’m sorry,” I said. “I was in a hurry. I didn’t see you. I should have been paying attention.”

I spoke my peace and then braced for a blast, but instead, the woman looked down at the ground. “It’s not you,” she said. “I’m just exhausted. I blew up, and I’m sorry.” Only then did she lift her eyes from the ground, and I saw tears flowing from them. There might have been some in my eyes as well.

For just a moment, we saw each other. These two flawed and frayed human beings doing the best we could. Not enemies, but neighbors. We walked into the store together and even shared a laugh about the whole thing. By the shopping carts (I let her go first), she stopped me and said, “I just want to thank you for speaking to me. It really helped.”

Now I’m sure I’m overstating it. A parking lot apology isn’t much in a world filled with wrong. But it was enough to shift the story.

“Don’t let the sun go down on your anger,” Paul writes. In other words, release it before it hardens into bitterness. Renounce it before it defines you. Refuse to let your rage have the last word.

In his 1957 sermon *Loving Your Enemies*, Martin Luther King Jr. warned that “returning violence for violence multiplies violence... Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.” And the truth of his words, grounded in scripture, still holds. Because the moral injury of wrath is not restricted to its intended target.

As Anne Lamott makes the point with her usual bite, “Not forgiving,” she writes, “is like drinking rat poison and then waiting for the rat to die.”

Or as the late U.S. Senator Alan Simpson said, “Hatred always corrodes the container it’s carried in.” Wrath is a spiritual toxin; it distorts the image of God in us and in our neighbor.

I don’t want to pretend that renouncing wrath is ever easy. I know that deep wounds can make release feel like surrender, or that letting go of anger can feel like letting go of justice. That’s why it takes practice, intention, and a community that will hold us to this better way.

But friends, the stakes are high. Rage is the great accelerant of our age. It spreads fast, burns hot, and leaves only ashes.

Christ calls us to be people of light, not kindling for the fire. I don't pretend to know what kind of anger you carried with you this morning. I don't know whose face comes to mind when you hear the word enemy. I would guess that you have them. So do I.

But here's the truth: we cannot run on rage and walk in the way of Christ at the same time. Not for long. One will always push the other out. So, choose the harder path—lay down the hostility, even if it feels justified. Choose to be known not for how fiercely you fight, but how stubbornly you love.

This week, try the spiritual practice of renunciation. Refuse to take the bait in that online thread. Answer an insult with gentleness. Seek out that person you've been avoiding and speak a word of grace. Show the world over and over again that there is another way forward.

Letting go of wrath is not about becoming calm people; it is about becoming free people—free to live as those for whom Christ gave his life. It's about becoming courageous people who hold righteous anger against injustice without letting it harden into hatred—people who channel our anger toward repair, not revenge, guided by the Spirit of the one who prayed for his persecutors, who forgave his executioners.

Friends, the world has enough fuel for its fires. We may live in the age of rage, but we belong to the way of Christ. Amen.