

## Introduction

There's almost too much "groove" in that song; I might get a little distracted... (Laughter) ...and forget to preach. Good morning, again. I'm not the senior pastor here, so if you're visiting with us, I always like to say if I'm up here, "Just give us more than one week... and you'll hear our senior pastor." He'll be back next week to finish this series entitled "Nah, I'm Good," dealing with the seven deadly sins, as we look at different attitudes and sins that God's Word has something to say about and we have to deal with as believers and want to respond by faith to what God has said in His Word. So today we're dealing with the sin of wrath. We will be in Romans 12:14-21. The Book of Romans is a letter that the apostle Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome. A lot of very weighty and meaty theology in this Book... a lot of instruction on the Christian life but also just a lot of amazing truth that he declares about who we are in Christ, who we were apart from Christ, and just really great stuff in the Book of Romans. So, let's look at Romans chapter 12, verses 14 through 21.

*"Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight. Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.' To the contrary, 'if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by doing so you will heap burning coals on his head.' Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."*

This is a very challenging passage to consider, especially when you think about all of the atrocities, the evil, the injustices that we see in our world, just in the last few weeks... let alone the last several years... let alone throughout history and all of time. Evil is not new; injustice is not new; tragedy is not new, and yet God has something to say about these things. But today, not wanting to diminish the reality of those things, I don't want us to think about what is our collective response to these things, as the Church, or even as a nation or those types of things. But today consider your individual standing before God and your relationship with others as a person... as an individual. So that's what we want to talk about today, not saying that there aren't ways that God has called us to deal with injustice in the world on a grand scale, but to focus more on: "What has God called me to do as I live my life with those around me, and how do I deal with things like anger, injustice, wrath?"

### 1. Wrath Is An Expression Of Anger That Has Built Up Over Time.

As we talk about wrath and we talk about anger, I think today we have shorter fuses than people have ever had before. It made me think a little bit about, "Why is it? Why do we get angry so quickly about these things?" It might be because we are conditioned to convenience, the speed at which technology delivers everything to us in the blink of an eye, or, at most a couple of days, with Prime shipping. (Laughter) It might also be because we can silo ourselves into bubbles with like-minded people and gorge ourselves on confirmation bias to the point that we can't comprehend that there are lots of people in the world, in our country, in our state, in our city, on our street, and yes, even in our church, who may not think the same way we do about everything. So we live in a day and age where we can custom-tailor the information we receive, the things we talk about, and the things that we agree with and disagree with in such a way that we think, "Oh... everyone thinks the way I do"...and we get angry really quickly when something conflicts with that. Case and point: this past election was really eye-opening to a lot of people. "How in the world can so many people think that way? I didn't think there were so many people that believed this or could

think that." It's because we do not talk to people who are not like us... to understand that not everybody is in the same boat and not everybody has the same approach to things.

I think those are some of the reasons that we get angry so quickly and so often these days. And it's not just something that the Church is recognizing. In a "Time" article written last June, so probably right at the height of political fever and fervor, Jeffrey Kluger wrote an article about outrage. I think the title is something like, "America Has An Anger Problem"...or something like that. He noticed this trend and he writes, "You would expect to get a Google hit for 'Activists Outraged' or 'Conservatives Outraged' or 'Party Regulars Outraged,' but there's also 'Vegans Outraged.' (Laughter) In this case, the owners of plant-based restaurants have taken to eating meat on their own farm and on their own time. There's 'Dancers Outraged' about a clothing ad in which a performer who portrays a dancer isn't really a dancer, making it the first ad in history that wasn't one hundred percent honest." (Laughter) "There's 'Gardeners Outraged' and 'Fishermen Outraged' and, yes, 'Knitters Outraged.' Something about the US Olympic Committee not letting them use the term 'Knitters' Olympics.' But these people do have needles, so in this case, maybe we should pay attention. Some the causes of anger are legitimate. The gardeners, for example, are chafed over a lovingly tended community garden that was bulldozed by a developer. Still there is something to be said for adjusting the rage to fit the provocation. If every offensive, unjust, or insulting incident turns into..." (remember, he is a professional writer) "...turns into a jolt of high-fructose fury, mainlined straight to the brain's amygdala, what's left when there's a truly right and righteous reason to rise up in anger?" This is not a pastor writing to believers; this is just a journalist writing about the state of things in America. And yet, there's a lot of insight to the fact that if we get so angry over little things all the time, then what is our response when there really is something to be angry about?

In the Book of Ephesians, we read that "in anger we are to not sin and to not let the sun go down on our anger." It doesn't ever explicitly condemn anger. I think what Scripture acknowledges is that anger is natural, it's part of who we are, and it's not a sin to feel angry. What's a sin is how you deal with your anger... what you do with your anger... and how you can get into unhealthy habits with that anger. That's what Scripture talks about. You can't look at wrath without looking at anger. Without a healthy outlook, we will all be angry about the wrong things and be about our anger in the wrong ways. Unhealthy anger destroys... it scars children and damages and sometimes ruins marriages. It can cost you a job or some other relationship, if we deal with anger in the wrong way. We often misplace anger... reacting to not the person we are angry with and causing even more consequences and a far-reaching ripple effect.

So anger, again, is not condemned in Scripture but wrath is. So let's take a look at how the two are related. Wrath, as we read in this Romans passage, is condemned. We read elsewhere that God hates wrath in us. We also read that we are not to become wrathful but to set aside wrath, in other writings from Paul. So what is wrath if it's not just anger? Wrath is an expression of anger that has built up over time. It's this idea that several things have made us angry, and we've stored up that anger and then unleash it on someone to punish them, or it's just an expression that I'm finally dealing with all of this anger that's built up. Wrath is not a knee-jerk reaction to a single incident. Wrath is an unleashing of several things that have happened that I've not dealt with... I've not resolved them or dealt with them in a healthy way. They all come out at once... That's wrath unleashed on someone, somebody, someones... whatever. That is not what God wants us to do with our anger.

Maybe you've had one of these conversations... maybe not... maybe I'm the only one in the room where someone may point out something to me... "Hey... this is an issue or a problem that I've noticed, and I want to bring it to your attention." My initial reaction is not to just agree right away, to apologize, to hear

them out. It's usually to call up my file on this person and go through... "Here are all the different things that I have issue with you, that I was so big about that I never brought them up. I did you the favor of not bringing up all of these things, but I remembered them and I wrote them down in my mind and kept a list. Now that you've pointed out one little thing in my life, I'm going to bring out my whole list against you to deal with these things." That's an unhealthy expression of anger. That's wrath, coming out to say, "I've kept a record of all the wrongs that you've done, and now I'm unleashing them on you. So that's an unhealthy way to unleash anger or express anger. That means we have not dealt with our anger in a healthy way. If we want to avoid the sin of wrath by dealing properly with the natural, not a sin emotion of anger... we have to see how they coordinate. We have to basically say, "If wrath is an accumulation of wrongs that have built up and I want to avoid that, I either need to not be angry as much so it doesn't build up, or I need to deal with anger and resolve anger as it comes about, rather than building a case against someone or something.

The key to all of this is love. I believe this is right here in Romans 12, but it's also in I Corinthians 13, the Love chapter, that talks about all of these characteristics of love. A few of them are that love keeps no record of wrongs, that love forgives, and that love is patient and kind. Loving will combat anger, even if anger arises. So you may not avoid all of the anger, but it helps you work through anger in a healthy and holy way by dealing with it the way that God has intended. Again, if we looked right here in Romans 12, verses 14 and 15, when it talks about... *"Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep."* Blessing is proactive. It's taking initiative, taking action to actually do something.

In the early '90s, DC Talk reminded us that "Love Is A Verb." So love does something. It's not just words. It's not just theory, but it acts... it pursues... it does something on the behalf of someone else. There's a natural way of doing things or the way that the world would expect us to react to things. It's usually binary; it's kind of a "do it or don't" situation. But Christ comes in and preaches a new message, a new way to follow Him and live for Him which is by faith in Him and letting God fight our battles and trusting that God will take care of us and God will provide, that God will draw people to Himself if we'll live by faith. So an example of this, when Jesus was teaching, was that if someone asks you to go a mile with them, the world would expect, "go the mile or don't go the mile." That's the natural or the unnatural response. But the supernatural response is what Christ proposes and says, "Go with them the mile plus another mile." So this Gospel way of living is totally different than what the culture of the world would expect.

It's the same with our enemies. The natural response to our enemies would be anger. The unnatural response to our enemies would be to ignore them, to bite our tongue, to hold ourselves back. We think that's the righteous thing to do, to just not respond, even though we're really mad and really bitter. But if we control ourselves, we have done the righteous and holy thing. But what Christ has called us to is supernatural. Not just the absence of conflict but the presence of harmony: to love our enemies, to pursue the good of our enemies is supernatural. That's something that only God can do through us. So the world looks, "Well, you have two options, I thought. It would be to act or not react"...but not to respond with love and grace, forgiveness and kindness, pursuing the good of those who are trying to hurt you. That's a supernatural way. That's the third way. That's what Jesus has called us to, and that's what Paul is reminding us of here. It sounds difficult because it is. "I can't do that." That's the point. That's what most of Scripture points us to. "God expects this." "I can't do that." That's the point. Trust in God, walk by faith, submit to the Holy Spirit and walk by faith, and then you won't do what's natural or unnatural; you'll do what's supernatural. And that's a testimony to God working in our lives. So that's what Christ has called us to and what God has called us to. And what Paul reminds us here, when it comes to anger and dealing

with conflict and dealing with those who have upset us, is to love and combat anger with love so that we might avoid wrath.

## 2. Wrath Is A Response In The Name Of Justice.

Another aspect of wrath that we need to evaluate in our lives is the idea that wrath is a response in the name of Justice. We want to cut down on the frequency of anger in our lives so it doesn't build up. We want to deal with anger in the right way. One of the ways that we do that is to say, "Okay... if I want to get angry less, I have to realize what makes me angry, and why does it make me angry." So if wrath, again, is a response in the name of Justice, meaning it's punishment for wrongdoing... right? All these wrongs need to be made right, so this unleashing of punishment, that makes them right... that's a sense of justice. We have that. We all have a sense of justice built into us because we were created in the image of a Holy and just God. God is righteous and just, and when He created man in His image, certain attributes that He has are built into us. And one of those is a desire for justice... a desire for right, and for things to be right and not wrong... and the knowledge of right and wrong... the difference of right and wrong. Wrath and anger come from a sense of things not being right and wanting them to be made right. That's why justice and even revenge resonate with us so strongly.

That's why Carrie Underwood made a bunch of money singing, "I dug my key into the side of his pretty little souped-up four-wheel drive..." (Laughter) "...carved my name into his leather seats. I took a Louisville Slugger to both headlights... I slashed a hole in all four tires. Maybe next time he'll think before he cheats." We hear that song and we go, "Yeah... Get him, Carrie." (Laughter) Right? Justice! That resonates with us. But that's not walking by faith. That's why Carrie also sang, "Jesus, Take The Wheel." (Laughter) ...because she knows... This was not the right response. "Jesus, take the wheel." That's the right response, right?

So there's a sense inside all of us in which wrongs should be righted. And they should be. Justice is good. Wrongs being righted is good. And yet, we have to understand what truly is injustice, and who is responsible for bringing justice. That's actually the last point. Where we get into trouble, I think, is where we redefine injustice in our own lives ...if we find ourselves setting up shop as the sovereign in our own lives. If we forget that we belong as citizens of the Kingdom of God and start to live as citizens of the kingdom of self, where we are on the throne, we have totally redefined what is just and unjust. So we'll get angry at all kinds of things because they are affronts against us, our pride, our honor, the way we want to do things. We are not thinking about, "Is this really an affront against God? If so, whose job is it to deal with that and make that right?" But I think it's natural for us because of our sin nature, and even as Christians, those patterns of the flesh that we continue to deal with, to put ourselves in that seat... put ourselves on the throne. So then our definition of justice is, "What makes me upset?" ...not "What makes God upset?"

The key to battling this is humility. If God is truly the King, God should really be on the throne and not me... then I need to humble myself. I need to realize who I am in relation to a holy, just, righteous, and perfect God. In verses 16 through 18, Paul addresses this right here in Romans 12, this passage that we read to start the message. *"Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty..."* ("Haughty" means "arrogant.") *"...but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight. Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all."* So there's a sense in which, again, we are deferring to the greater good... not just our good. We are recognizing God is on the throne, not me. These are all acts of humility that keep the right perspective in our lives of whose justice are we trying to achieve and pursue. Whose wrongs and whose

pride and whose honor are we really trying to defend? ...Ourselves or the Lord's? There's a sense in which it says, "Think about the good of all; be in peace and harmony with all." So again, we're thinking about not just ourselves but more than ourselves... outside of ourselves. Collectively, what is the good? That will help us define justice in the right way, and then we'll get angry about true injustices rather than "My Amazon shipment didn't come on time." Or, "The microwave is broken, and I didn't have this in thirty seconds like I expected to. My whole day is thrown off." All of those little things that really throw us off and make us angry, and then we unleash on whoever because who am I supposed to take my complaint to? I can't... well, I might... bash my microwave, but that won't do any good because then it won't work at all tomorrow. I might yell at the dog or the kids or the wife or the boss or the coworker or the neighbor... right? Our anger, dealt with in the wrong way, is because we have a false sense of justice, and injustice starts to ruin relationships and damage outside of ourselves... and damages a testimony... definitely not pointing people to God or walk by faith. So we become, again, citizens of the kingdom of self, defending our kingdoms, and that's where most of our anger comes from. These are the unhealthy ways we deal with anger.

### 3. Wrath Belongs to God. (v. 20)

So a lot of the things in those first two points discuss cutting down on the frequency of anger, being angry about the things that really matter, so those are big enough steps to take... that's a big enough ask to try to walk by faith in those things. But even when it comes to true injustices... things that really are sins condemned by the Lord, that we have been the victims of... God has a big faith response for us in those things as well. If it's not difficult enough to get to a point where we are not just defending ourselves and our pride, but really truly trying to defend the honor of the Lord or defend someone else or pursue justice that is truly what God desires, He still has a word for us that challenges us here in verse 19. *"...never avenge yourselves but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord. To the contrary, 'if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by doing so you will heap burning coals on his head.' Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."* This is truly a faith response to true injustice and wrongs against us. Even when we have been wronged, he says, "Don't avenge yourself. Leave it to the wrath of God." How difficult is that?

In James 1:19-20, he says, *"Let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God."* So God has called us to a faith walk that handles anger in the right way and trusts what God will do what He says He will do. The key to trusting God with wrath and leaving wrath and vengeance to the Lord is faith... believing that He is not a liar, believing His promise that He will repay... believing that He is just and will make things right, and that is not our job. That is a huge step and leap of faith.

I think when we read about heaping hot coals on someone's head, again, we're kind of slashing all four tires... it's like, "Yes... We want to heap hot coals on their head. That's our revenge... that's better than what I had planned. Good idea, God." (Laughter) But that's not what God wants for us in that equation. To heap hot coals on someone's head... yeah, it is the idea of, they expect a like response, if an enemy attacks and we attack them and just start this vicious cycle. That's what they expect and the anger keeps flowing, but to forgive or do something nice can really get under their skin. But that's not for us to take pride in or pleasure in... to say, "Ahh, this is an even sweeter revenge than I had planned." That's not what God intends. What God is saying is that there is that sense of them being punished by that. It will get under their skin and bother them. But ultimately what that's going to do, as the Scripture tells us, *"Kindness leads to repentance."* So God's kindness and patience and grace and mercy toward us often leads to our

repentance before the Lord, and so when we heap hot coals on someone's head, it should be with the desire that they will repent and ask forgiveness and make things right. But even if they don't, what Scripture is telling us is that the hot coals will remain on their head, and that's a punishment worse than you could have doled out anyway ...but not for us, again, to celebrate. It's not for us to do an end-zone dance when we heap hot coals on someone's head, if we love our enemies, because if you look at the rest of the passage, what did we just talk about? Right? Loving our enemies... blessing our enemies... we desire their good. So when you heap coals on someone's head, it's for the desire that they would turn from their sin and be brought to the Lord. But either way, we're leaving it to the Lord to deal with, and that's faith that He will do what He said He would do. What's between us and the Lord is our faith and our obedience... not making sure someone else comes to faith and obedience because of the wrong they have done to us but that God would deal with them and draw them to Himself. This faith, this trust that God is not a liar, this trusting that God will or already has punished sin accordingly... this is what He has promised.

I got to hear Dr. Russell Moore a couple of years ago at the "For The Church" Conference, and this part of his message convicted me; it opened my eyes, it kind of set my perspective in a whole new way. He said, "Self-confidence will want you to settle all of your scores. Anxiety will want you to strike out and make you feel you have to make everything right. If you are having difficulty forgiving, holding onto what that person said or what that person did, is because you are scared... scared that unless you settle the score, the score will not be settled. In doing so, you are denying the doctrine of hell and the penal substitutionary atonement of Christ. If you believe that no sin is left outside of the scrutiny of the judgment of God, either at the cross or in hell, then why on earth are you seeking to hold onto those things and making sure you get your pound of flesh?" What Dr. Moore is saying is that every sin is either already covered by the grace of God or will be punished for eternity by God. There is no sin outside of this equation. No wrong done to you or by you is exempt from this plan. So faith in what God has said is true and that what He has done was sufficient, trusts that the wrath of God, poured out on Christ on the cross, covered sin, and anyone who believes in Christ has their sin paid for. And those who don't trust in Christ and don't believe in Christ will be punished for eternity for their sin. So nowhere in that equation has God trusted us with the punishment of that sin. He will take care of it. He is faithful. He will keep His promise. He is just and righteous. So when we think that we have to settle the score, we are not believing that God will settle the score. We are not trusting that God will do what He has promised. In effect, what you are saying is, "If God won't handle their sin appropriately, how can I know that He has covered my sin appropriately? How can I think 'so-and-so' is beyond the grace of Jesus but not me?" If you zoom out on that logic, basically what you're saying is, "I don't know if God's grace for me is sufficient, and I lack faith that God has covered me by His grace and can cover whoever else by His grace."

So what God has called us to, when it comes to anger and true injustice... and again, I try to give this disclaimer... I know that in this short talk... if you have truly been wronged and hurt, this short talk is not going to flip a switch for you and just change everything in your life. But what we want to do is to say, "You can start a process today of trusting in Jesus to heal those hurts, heal those wounds, to help you forgive." Forgiveness doesn't set the wrongdoer free; it sets you free. The person who has wronged you may never acknowledge that they even did something wrong. They may never accept; they may never receive your forgiveness. They may always continue to maintain that they are right and haven't sinned against God or you. You are not to walk with that baggage for the rest of your life. God wants to set you free in your forgiveness of them. That's faith in trusting that God's grace is sufficient... not just for you, but whoever will believe in Jesus can be covered by that grace. So wrath is not left to us; it's left to the Lord. That's why vengeance is His. He will pour out wrath on unrepentant sinners. He has poured out wrath on Christ. Those

who believe receive that grace. No sin is left uncovered by either of those. So if we want to be people who are not wrathful, we need to walk by faith and trust in what God has done.

Ephesians says that "Apart from Christ, we are all children of wrath." Every human is a child of wrath, apart from Christ. Yet, in 1 Thessalonians chapter 5, we are promised that God has not destined believers for wrath but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. So, yes... God will punish sin. And if you trust in Christ, that sin has been punished in Christ already. That's the message of the Gospel. That's what we cling to and stand on and claim, as believers. It's that God sent His Son to earth to live as man; fully man and fully God... mind-blowing enough... and then He lived a sinless life so that His death on the cross would pay for sinners like you and me. ...Because if He had any sin of His own, His death would have to cover His own sin. But Christ had no sin debt so His death paid for sinners like you and me. If we will trust in that... believe that by faith... we'll be saved. Our sin is forgiven; we are given eternal life, and we can live forever in fellowship with God and not just us... anyone who believes in Christ. So when we get to heaven, you're going to see some former enemies there. You're going to see some people that you thought, "I thought heaven was just for the good people." You missed the point. There are no good people deserving of heaven. There are only sinners separated from God. We trust in Christ; the Bible calls us righteous... Justified. God looks at us and He sees the righteousness of Jesus Christ, and that's why we get to go to heaven. And that's why the really bad people who are not here today can also go to heaven, if they trust in Christ. The part we have in that is living by faith so that the testimony of Christ is proclaimed to them ...Responding to their wrongdoing in a supernatural way, by loving them, showing them grace, showing them forgiveness. That preaches Christ and the cross; that preaches grace. And then it's between them and God, but our role is faith and obedience to what God has called us to.

Let's pray. We have a time today now to respond to the truth of God ...the Word of God. I pray, by the power of the Spirit of God, that He has made these truths plain to you. So during this next time of response, it's an opportunity for you to respond to what you have heard, to believe by faith that God's Word is true and that He has sent Jesus, that He will right the wrongs. So whether you are a Christian who has trusted in Christ already and you just need to let go of the things that make you angry, and you find yourself angry and lashing out all the time, and you need God to remove that anger... I pray that God would humble you. I pray that God would remind you of who He is, what He has done, and who you are in relationship to Him... that you have been forgiven to forgive others. If you are not a believer in Jesus Christ, you've never trusted in this Gospel message, I pray that today you could be the day of salvation for you... that you have heard this message of grace, that though real and tragic and hurtful things have been done to you... that doesn't define your eternity. Who you are in relationship to God defines your eternity. And if you will trust in Christ by faith, you can have eternal life with Him. Leave the punishing of sin up to God.

So if you would, stand, and during this next song, if you want to come up here and pray at these steps, if you want to talk to someone and just start that process... Again, I know it's not just... you can't make everything right with a twenty-minute talk... I understand that. But if God has shown you today, the way that the world has taught me to deal with my anger and my issues is not working, I need to talk to somebody who can point me to truth... a process of healing, a process of hope and love and forgiveness. We have people here to receive you and talk to you and pray with you. If that conversation is not long enough, we have a Connection Center right outside those doors if you want to go and talk to someone. Say, "Tell me more about this: How to forgive, how to love, what God has done in loving me." Respond to the Lord today.