

Homily against Anger

by St. Basil the Great

When medical precepts are to the point and accord with the art's teachings, their usefulness is demonstrated above all from experience; likewise with spiritual injunctions, above all when the precepts receive testimony from their outcome, then they are manifest as wise and useful for the correction of life and the perfection of those who comply with them. For we have heard Proverbs explicitly declare, "Anger destroys even the prudent" [Prov 15.1], and we have also heard the apostolic injunction, "Put away from you all anger and temper and clamor, with all malice" [Eph 4.31], and the Lord's saying that one who is angry without purpose at his brother is subject to judgment [Mt 5.22]. Now, when we have come to experience this passion, not arising in ourselves but assaulting us from outside like some unexpected tempest, then above all we discover the excellence of the divine precepts. When we make space for the anger, like an outlet for a violent river, while quietly observing the undignified confusion of those overpowered by the passion, we discover from their actions that these words are to the point: "An angry man is not dignified" [Prov 11.25].

For whenever, once reason has been pushed aside, the passion takes control of the soul for itself, it makes the human being entirely like a wild beast; it does not allow him to be a human being, since he no longer has the help of reason. For as venom is in venomous animals, so temper becomes in those who are provoked. They are maddened like dogs, they strike like scorpions, *they* bite like snakes. Scripture also acknowledges this in calling those ruled by this passion by the name of wild beasts, to whom they have made themselves akin through evil. For it calls them dumb dogs [Is 56.10], and snakes, a generation of vipers [Mt 23:33], and the like. For those prepared to destroy each other and harm those of their own kind would be appropriately counted among the wild beasts and venomous animals, in whom is present by nature an irreconcilable hatred toward human beings.

Because of anger tongues are unbridled and lips are unguarded; unrestrained hands, outrages, reproaches, slanders, blows, and other such things that cannot be numbered, are offspring of the passions of anger and temper. Through temper also a sword is sharpened; a human hand dares to kill a human being. Through this brothers have become ignorant of each other, and parents and children have forgotten their natural bond. For angry persons are first ignorant of themselves, then indeed of all their friends as well. For as mountain torrents rushing together toward the valleys sweep away whatever is in their path, so the violent and ungovernable attacks of angry people likewise sweep through everything...

...Those whose temper is aroused respect neither gray hairs, nor virtuous life, nor close kinship, nor favors previously received, nor anything else worthy of honor. Temper is a kind of short-lived insanity. Often they even rush to do manifest harm to themselves in their zeal for revenge, heedless of their own concerns. For as if stung on all sides by a gadfly by the memory of those who have grieved them, as their temper struggles and leaps within them, they do not desist until either they have done some harm to those who have provoked them, or perhaps also received some, as may happen, as often objects that are smashed violently suffer greater damage than they cause when shattered against hard bodies.

Who could adequately describe the evil, how those with quick tempers, having fastened on a chance pretext, shouting and furious, attack no less than some shameless venomous beast? Such a person does not stop until great and incurable harm is done, as if a bubble of anger bursts and boiling, seething hot phlegm pours out. For neither a sword's edge, nor fire, nor anything else frightening, is sufficient to hold back the soul driven insane by anger; any more, perhaps, than they hold back those subject to the demons, from whom angry people differ in nothing, either in the appearance or in the disposition of their soul. For in those who long for revenge, the blood boils around the heart as if stirred up and blustering because of a raging fire. Bursting forth to appear visibly, it shows the angry person with an appearance different from the one customary and familiar to all, as if it were exchanged for some mask on stage. Those near him do not recognize in his eyes their usual expression; but his gaze is frenzied and fire is in his eyes. He sharpens his teeth like a boar going into battle. His face is livid and suffused with blood, his swollen body is heavy, his blood vessels burst. His breathing rushes wildly, driven by the storm within. His voice is harsh and strained to the uttermost, and his speech is inarticulate, pouring forth heedlessly, proceeding without sequence or order or clarity.

But whenever anger becomes implacable, like a flame with abundant fuel, and holds tight to provocations, then indeed the spectacle is indescribable and unbearable to behold...

But whenever anger becomes implacable, like a flame with abundant fuel, and holds tight to provocations, then indeed the spectacle is indescribable and unbearable to behold. His hands are lifted against his kinsfolk and all the limbs of his body attack, while his feet leap mercilessly upon the most vital organs, and everything at hand becomes a weapon for the madness. And if such persons also find an equal wickedness fighting against them from the opposing side, another anger and a similar insanity, then indeed they come to blows. They then inflict on each other and themselves suffer such things as perchance

those under the command of such a demon are to suffer. For maiming of limbs or even death are often the prizes of anger that those fighting carry away. One started to do violence unjustly and the other repaid it; the second inflicted harm in return, the first did not submit. And the body is cut asunder by blows, while the temper removes the perception of pain. For they do not have time for the perception of what they have suffered, since the whole of their soul has been moved toward revenge against those who have grieved them.

...Do not then cure the evil with evil, nor attempt to outdo each other in such matters. For in contests for superiority in wickedness the victor is more miserable, since he departs having the greater sin. Therefore, do not become one who pays an evil debt in full, nor take out a wicked loan by greater wickedness. Has someone insulted you in anger? Stop the evil by silence. But you, as if receiving the stream of that person's anger into your own heart, imitate the wind, repaying by blowing back what it has borne to you. Do not use your enemy as a teacher, and as for what you hate, do not emulate this. Do not, as it were, become a mirror of the one prone to anger, showing the likeness of that person in yourself. He has turned red. But are you not the color of wine? His eyes are bloodshot. But, tell me, do yours look calm? His voice is harsh. Is yours gentle? The echo in the desert does not shout back as clearly to one who speaks loudly as the insults turn back against the abuser. Rather, the echo comes back the same while the abuse returns with something added. For what sorts of things do insulters say to each other? One says the other is an insignificant person born of an insignificant person; the other in return calls him a slave born of a slave in the household. One says "poor laborer," the other says "tramp." One says "stupid;" the other says "crazy, until their insults, like arrows, run out. Then, when all the abuse of the tongue has been hurled, then in addition they proceed to avenge themselves through actions. For temper incites fighting, and fighting gives birth to abuse, and abuse to blows, and blows to wounds, and often wounds to death.

From the very beginning let us stop the evil, removing the anger from our souls by every contrivance. For thus we could excise the greatest number of evils together with this passion, since it is a kind of root and source. Has someone abused you? Bless him. Has he struck you? Endure it. Does he spit on you and regard you as nothing? Then accept this thought about yourself, that you were taken from the earth, and you will return to the earth again [Gen 3.19]. For one who applies this concept to himself beforehand, will find all dishonor to be less than the truth. For thus indeed you will provide your enemy no means of revenge, you will show yourself invulnerable to the abuse, and you will procure for yourself a great crown of perseverance, making the other's insanity a starting point for your own philosophy. So, if you listen to me, you will even add freely to the insults. Does he say you are insignificant, and lower class, and a nobody from nowhere? Then say you are yourself earth and ashes. You are not more majestic

than our father Abraham, who called himself these things [Gen 18.27]...

...Does he call you stupid and a beggar and worthy of nothing? Then say that you are yourself a "worm" [Ps 22.6], and born from a dunghill, as David's words say. To these examples add also the goodness of Moses. When abused by Aaron and Miriam, he did not accuse them before God but prayed for them [Num 12.1ff]. Would you not choose to be a disciple of such men, who are friends of God and blessed, rather than of those filled with the spirit of wickedness?

When you are stirred by the temptation to abuse, consider that you are being tested as to whether through longsuffering you will come near to God, or through anger run away toward the adversary. Give your thoughts the opportunity to choose the good portion. For you will either help that person somehow through your example of meekness, or exact a more severe vengeance through disdain. For what could become more painful to your enemy, than to see his enemy as above insults? Do not overturn your own purpose, and do not appear to be easily accessible to those who insult you. Let him bark at you ineffectually; let it burst upon himself. For the one who strikes one who feels no pain takes vengeance on himself, for neither is his enemy repaid, nor is his temper assuaged. Likewise, the person reproaching one unaffected by abuse is unable to find relief for his passion. On the contrary, as I have said, he is indeed cut to the heart. Moreover, in these circumstances, what sorts of things will each of you be called? He is abusive, but you are magnanimous; he is prone to anger and hard to bear, but you are longsuffering and meek. He will change his mind about the things he said, but you will never repent of your virtue.

Why must I say so many things? The abuse shuts him out of the kingdom of heaven, "for abusers will not inherit the kingdom of God" [I Cor 6.io]; but your silence prepares the kingdom, "for he who perseveres until the end, that one will be saved" [Mt 10.22]. But when you take revenge and oppose the abuse by equaling it, what will you say in your defense? Is it enough that he provoked you? And does that make you worthy of pardon? For the fornicator who transfers the blame to his girlfriend, as having greatly enticed him toward the sin, is no less worthy of condemnation. There are neither crowns without opponents, nor defeats without adversaries. Listen to David, who says, "When the sinner stood against me;" not "I was provoked," or "I took revenge;" but "I was mute and humbled, and I kept silence from good things" [Ps 38.2-3, LXX].

...But you are provoked by the abuse since you consider it rude, bad, crass; *yet you* imitate it as good. For behold, you have the same passion that you condemn. Are you anxious to look down on another's evil? Or do you regard your own disgraceful conduct as nothing? Are insults wicked? Flee from imitating them. For indeed the fact that another started it does not suffice to excuse you. Therefore, it is more just, as I myself am persuaded, even if his irritation is greater,

since he did not have an example of self-control; but you, seeing the ugliness of the angry person, did not guard yourself against taking on his likeness, but are irritated and annoyed and angry in return; and your passion becomes an excuse for the one who started it. For by the things you do yourself, you release him from guilt, and you condemn yourself. For if temper is wicked, why did you not turn away from the evil? But if it is worthy of pardon, why are you annoyed at the bad-tempered person? So, if you came second to the angry exchange, this is no advantage to you. For in wrestling matches, it is not the one who moves first in a bout but the one who wins that is crowned. Accordingly, not only one who initiates something terrible, but also one who follows a wicked leader toward sin, is condemned.

Suppose he calls you a poor laborer. If he speaks truly, admit the truth; but if he lies, what are his words to you? Neither be filled with conceit about praise that goes beyond the truth, nor be aggravated over insults that do not apply to you. Do you not see how arrows naturally pierce through hard and rigid objects, but their force is blunted by soft and yielding objects? Consider indeed that the power of abuse is of the same kind. One who resists it receives it into himself, while one who yields and withdraws dissolves by his gentleness of character the wickedness brought against him.

But why does the name "poor" trouble you? Remember your own nature, that you came naked into the world and will leave it naked [Job 1.21]. What is more poor than a naked person? You have heard nothing terrible, unless you claim what has been said as your own. Was anyone ever carried off to prison because of poverty? It is not shameful to be poor, but it is shameful not to bear the poverty nobly. Remember the Master, who "being rich, became poor for our sake" [2 Cor 8.9]. If you are called foolish and stupid, recall the Judean insults through which the true Wisdom was abased: "You are a Samaritan, and you have a demon" [Jn 8.48]. So if you act angry, you have confirmed the reproaches; for what is more foolish than anger? If you remain without anger, you shame the one insulting you, showing self-control through your actions.

...Have you been struck? So also was the Lord. Have you been spat upon? So also was our Master. For, "he did not turn away his face from the shame of spitting" [Is 50:6]. Were you falsely accused? So also was the Judge. Did they tear off your garment? They also stripped my Lord and divided his clothes among themselves [Mt 27:31-35]. You have not yet been condemned, you have not yet been crucified. Many things are lacking to you, if you would overtake him through imitation.

Let each of these things enter into your mind, and let them hold back the flames. For by preparing and predisposing ourselves beforehand through such reflections, we stop the leaping and throbbing of our heart and bring back our thoughts to steadiness and calm. This also, then, is what was said by David, that

"I am prepared and am not troubled" [Ps 119:60]. Accordingly, it is necessary to hold back the frantic and passion-stricken movement of the soul by remembering the examples of blessed men: how meekly the great David bore the raving violence of Shimei. For he did not give opportunity to the movement of anger, but redirecting his thought toward God, he said, "The Lord told Shimei to curse David" [2 Sam 16:10]. Therefore, upon hearing himself called a man of blood, a lawless man, he did not become aggravated by this but humbled himself, accepting the insults as if he deserved them. Strip away from yourself these two attitudes: neither consider yourself worthy of great things, nor regard another human being as greatly inferior to you in worth. For then our temper will never rise up against the dishonors that are brought upon us.

It is terrible for one who has benefited from good deeds and is indebted for great favors to be ungrateful and besides this to begin inflicting insults and dishonors. It is terrible, but more for the one doing it than for the one who suffers the evil. Let him insult you, but do not yourself inflict insults. Let what is said be an athletic school to train you in philosophy. If you have not been bitten, you are not wounded. But if indeed you suffer something in your soul, keep what causes pain within yourself. For the Psalmist says, "My heart is troubled within me" [Ps 143:47], that is, he did not let the passion pass to the outside but calmed it, as a wave is broken on the beach. Quiet for me your howling and raging heart. Let your passions respect the presence of reason in you, like a disorderly child at the coming of a respected man.

...How, then, can we flee the damage caused by anger? We can persuade temper not to act before thought, but let us first take care that it never runs ahead of reason; let us keep it like a horse under a yoke, and let it obey reason as if it were a kind of bridle, never stepping outside its own place, but being led by reason wherever it guides it. Further, the soul's faculty of temper is useful to us in many of the acts of virtue. When like a soldier who has placed his arms in the custody of his commander, it readily offers help in what is ordered, it can perhaps be an ally to reason against sin. For the temper is a sinew of the soul, producing vigor in it for the accomplishment of good actions. When the soul is relaxed through pleasure, as when iron is hardened by tempering, this faculty leads it from being soft and slack to become austere and courageous. If your temper is not roused against the Evil One, you will not be able to hate him as much as he deserves. For I hold that it is necessary to have equal zeal for the love of virtue and for the hatred of sin. For this above all temper is useful. Whenever *like* a dog beside a shepherd it follows the rational faculty closely, it remains meek and tame toward those helping it, and readily available at the call of reason, while it is savage toward the strange voice and face, even if he seems to provide a service, but bows down when called by a companion or friend. The cooperation of the faculty of temper with the prudent part of the soul is most excellent and appropriate. For

such a person will be irreconcilable and implacable toward things plotted against him, never accepting fondness toward what is harmful, but *like* a wolf ever howling and tearing to pieces the proposed pleasure. Such indeed is the usefulness of temper for those who know how to handle it.

For by the way it is used each of the other faculties also becomes either evil or good for the one who possesses it. As for the soul's faculty of desire, one who uses it for the enjoyment of the flesh and the consumption of impure pleasure is disgusting and licentious, while one who turns it toward the love of God and the longing for eternal good things is enviable and blessed. And again, as for the rational faculty, one who handles it well is prudent and intelligent, while one who sharpens his mind for the harm of his neighbor is a worker of mischief and evil.

...Therefore, let us not make the faculties given us for salvation by the Creator into starting points of sin for ourselves. So also, indeed, the temper, moved when it is necessary and as it is necessary, produces courage and perseverance and self-restraint; but when acting against right reason it becomes insanity. For this reason also the Psalm advises, "Be angry, but do not sin" [Ps 4.5]. And the Lord threatens judgment for those who are angered without purpose [Mt 5.22], but he does not reject the use of anger for things that are necessary, as a medicine. For the words, "I will place enmity between you and the serpent" [Gen 3.15], and "Be enemies of the Midianites" [Num 25.17], teach us to use temper as a weapon. For this reason Moses, the meekest of all people [Num 12.3], when punishing idolatry, placed weapons in the hands of the Levites for the slaughter of their brothers. He said, "Let each put his sword on his thigh, and go through from gate to gate, and return through the encampment; and let each kill his brother, and each his neighbor, and each the one near him" [Ex 32.27]. And a little later he says, "You have consecrated your hands today to the Lord, each in his son, and in his brother, that a blessing may be given to you" [Ex 32.29, LXX]. And what made Phineas just? Was it not his just anger against the fornicators? He, being very kind and gentle, when he saw that the fornication of Zambri and the Midianite woman had become open and shameless, and they did not hide the unseemly sight of their shame, did not hold back but used his temper for a needful purpose, driving his javelin through them both [Num 25.6-8]. And did not Samuel, when Agag the king of Amalek was kept alive by Saul contrary to the command of God, in just anger lead him forward and slaughter him [1 Sam 15.33]? So, often temper becomes a helper in good acts. And Elijah the zealot killed four hundred and fifty men, priests of shame, and four hundred men, priests of the groves, who ate at Jezebel's table, through considered and prudent temper, for the benefit of all Israel [1 Kgs 18.22-40].

But you are angry at your brother without purpose. For how is it not without purpose when one acts because the other provokes him? And you act like

dogs who bite the stones when they cannot reach the one throwing them. The one acted upon is to be given compassion, the one acting is to be hated. Redirect your temper onto the murderer of human beings, the father of lies, the worker of sin; but sympathize also with your brother, because if he continues in sin, with the devil he will be delivered up to eternal fire.

...Yet as temper and anger are different words, so also their meanings differ greatly from each other. For temper is a certain kind of heating and quick rising in steam of passion; but anger is an abiding sorrow and lasting impulse toward vengeance against the wrongdoers, as if the soul lusts for requital. Therefore it is necessary to know that human beings offend through both dispositions, either moved insanely and capriciously by provocations, or deceitfully and treacherously lying in wait for those who grieved them. We must guard against both these errors.

How, then, can the passion avoid being directed toward what it must avoid? How? It can if you are taught beforehand the humility which the Lord both prescribed in word and modeled in action, at one time saying, "Let the one who wishes to be first among you be last of all" [cf. Mt 9:35], and at another time, meek and unmoved, bearing with the one who struck him [Jn 18:22-23]. For the Maker and Master of heaven and earth, who is worshiped by all the intelligible and sense-perceptible creation, who "upholds all things by the word of his power" [Heb 1:8], did not send him alive into Hades, with the earth cleft beneath the impious one. Rather, he admonished and taught, "If I have spoken evilly, bear witness regarding the evil; but if I have spoken well, why do you strike me?" [Jn 18:23] For if you have become accustomed to being last of all in accord with the commandment of the Lord, when will you be irritated at having your dignity affronted? When a small child abuses you, the insults are an occasion for laughter; and when one driven out of his mind by inflammation of the brain speaks words of disdain, you think him worthy of compassion rather than hatred. Thus the movement of grief is engendered not by the insulting words but by our arrogance toward the one who has abused us and the fantasy each one of us has about himself. So if you put aside from your mind both of these, the noise of the words hurled at you will appear instead as an empty echo. Therefore, "Cease from anger, and leave behind temper" [Ps 37:8], that you may escape the judgment against anger, which "is revealed from heaven upon all the impiety and injustice of human beings" [Rom 1:18]. For if by prudent thought you could cut out the bitter root of temper, you would remove with it many of the passions that begin from this source. For deceit and suspicion and faithlessness and malice and treachery and rashness, and the whole swarm of such wickednesses, are offshoots of this evil. Therefore, indeed, let us not bring to ourselves so great an evil. It is sickness of soul, darkening of thoughts, estrangement from God, ignorance of kinship, cause of conflict, fullness of misfortunes, a wicked demon coming to birth in our very

souls. It is indeed as if a certain shameless inhabitant has taken possession beforehand of our inner self and closed the entrance to the Holy Spirit. For where enmity, strife, temper, quarreling, contentiousness and never-silent clamor are produced in the soul, there the Spirit of meekness does not rest. But let us listen to the advice of the blessed Paul and put away from us all anger and temper and clamor with all malice [Eph 4.31], and become kind and compassionate to each other, awaiting the blessed hope promised to the meek. For "blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth" [Mt 5.5], in Christ Jesus our Lord, to whom be glory and dominion unto the ages. Amen.

The End and Glory to God!