

The Wrath of Man
James 1:20

James 1:20 reads, “For the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God.”

In **James 1:29** we receive a three-fold exhortation concerning right relations with other people – “Wherefore, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath.” **Verse 20** then adds an explanation for the Biblical exhortation that we should be “slow to wrath” – “For the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God.” This truth is presented as an explanation of warning, in order to motivate us to follow the exhortation to be “slow to wrath.” Grammatically, this verse provides a contrast between “the wrath of man” and “the righteousness of God,” a contrast that turns on the negative verb “worketh not.” Indeed, “the wrath of man” (or, selfish wrath) and “the righteousness of God” are never in union with one another; for “the righteousness of God” is never produced through “the wrath of man.” Rather, “the wrath of man” (or, selfish wrath) always moves in opposition to “the righteousness of God.” Even so, this explanation warns us against the practice of selfish wrath in our lives. Let us then consider the problem of selfish wrath and the product of selfish wrath.

I. The Problem of Selfish Wrath.

In **James 1:20** the problem of selfish wrath is defined with the phrase, “For the wrath of man.” As in the case of the previous verse, the word “wrath” that is employed in this warning refers, not necessarily refer to an explosive, passionate outburst of angry temper, but to an inner, deeper spirit of resentment, which may reveal itself on occasion through angry outbursts. Thus this Biblical warning concerns both our external actions and our inner attitude. Yet this warning is not speaking of any spirit of wrath and anger, but of a specific category of wrath and anger. It is speaking concerning that spirit of wrath and anger which finds its source, not in the Holy Spirit of God, but in the selfish heart of man. It is speaking concerning that spirit of wrath and anger which finds its motivation in selfishness.

Certainly, there is a godly anger and righteous indignation against sin. Such godly anger and righteous indignation is always motivated by the glory of God and centered upon the holiness of God. Again and again throughout God’s Word, we observe the Lord our God Himself expressing such godly anger and righteous indignation. In fact, the closing portion of **Psalms 7:11** declares, “And God is angry with the wicked every day.” This is the spirit of wrath and anger that our Lord Jesus Christ experienced in **Mark 3:5** – “And when he had looked round about on them with anger, being grieved for the hardness of their hearts, he saith unto the man, Stretch forth thine hand. And he stretched it out: and his hand was restored whole as the other.” This is the spirit of wrath and anger that King Saul experienced in **1 Samuel 11:6** – “And the Spirit of God came upon Saul when he heard those tidings, and his anger was kindled greatly.” This is the spirit of wrath and anger that Moses the man of God experienced in **Exodus 32:19** – “And it came to pass, as soon as he came nigh unto the camp, that he saw the calf, and the dancing: and Moses’ anger waxed hot, and he cast the tables out of his hands, and brake them beneath the mount.” In fact, this is the spirit of wrath and anger that is encouraged in **Proverbs 25:23** – “The north wind driveth away rain: so doth an angry countenance a backbiting tongue.”

Yet **James 1:20** is not speaking of this godly anger and righteous indignation against sin for the glory of the Lord. Rather, it is speaking of selfish anger against that which annoys self or frustrates self from getting self's way. It is speaking of that spirit of wrath and anger that is rooted in selfishness and pride. Even so, **Proverbs 21:24** states, "Proud and haughty scorner is his name, who dealeth in proud wrath." It is speaking that spirit of wrath and anger that is defined as a work of our selfish, sinful flesh. Even so, **Galatians 5:19-21** states, "Now the works of the flesh are manifest, which are these; Adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness, idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, variance, emulations, wrath, strife, seditions, heresies, envyings, murders, drunkenness, revellings, and such like: of the which I tell you before, as I have also told you in time past, that they which do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God." As such, it is often joined with bitterness, evil speaking, strife, hatred, and malice. Thus God's Word commands us to put away from us any spirit of selfish wrath and anger. In **Ephesians 4:31** the command is given, "Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamour, and evil speaking, be put away from you, with all malice." Again in **Colossians 3:8** the command is given, "But now ye also put off all these; anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy communication out of your mouth."

II. The Product of Selfish Wrath.

Indeed, we must put away from us any spirit of selfish wrath and anger because "the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God." Selfish wrath and anger does not (yea, cannot) produce the righteousness of God. The righteousness of God directly opposes our sinful nature. Therefore, the spirit of wrath and anger that springs from our selfish nature cannot be the foundation for the righteousness of God in our hearts and lives. Rather, selfish wrath and anger can only deaden and destroy the principle of God's righteousness in our hearts and lives. It never moves us to do that which is prescribed by our Lord and that which is pleasing to our Lord. It never helps us to walk in the way of righteousness. It never serves the cause of Christ. Selfish wrath and anger never yields the fruit of righteousness in our own lives or in the lives of those whom we influence. Indeed, "the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace of them that make peace" (James 3:18). The fruit of righteousness never grows in the soil of selfish wrath and anger.

Rather, selfish wrath and anger always produces the unrighteousness of sin. Selfish wrath and anger itself is a sinful attitude, for it violates our Lord's standard of God-centeredness for our lives. Furthermore, selfish wrath and anger moves us to even greater levels of unrighteousness in our behavior, whether in our spirit, in our words, or in our actions. Selfish wrath and anger will give a place for our adversary the devil to manipulate and motivate our lives unto sin. Even so, **Ephesians 4:26-27** gives the warning, "Be ye angry, and sin not: let not the sun go down upon your wrath: neither give place to the devil." Selfish wrath and anger will exalt spiritual foolishness. Even so, **Proverbs 14:29** gives the warning, "He that is slow to wrath is of great understanding: but he that is hasty of spirit exalteth folly." Selfish wrath and anger will stir up strife and contention. Even so, **Proverbs 15:18** gives the warning, "A wrathful man stirreth up strife: but he that is slow to anger appeaseth strife." Selfish wrath and anger will lead to cruel and outrageous behavior. Even so, the opening portion of **Proverbs 27:4** gives the warning, "Wrath is cruel, and anger is outrageous." Indeed, selfish wrath and anger will result in an abundance of transgression against God and against others. Even so, **Proverbs 29:22** gives the warning, "An angry man stirreth up strife, and a furious man aboundeth in transgression." Let us then put away any and all selfish wrath and anger from our hearts and lives.