

A Life Without Anger

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We have been, here in January, speaking about growth and that we don't really drift into growing but set ourselves to it and that this is something that goes part and parcel with being a Christian. Christ is dynamic and doesn't want us to be stagnant. So we visualize being growing people, set ourselves to a firm decision about growing, and then find ways to do so – especially setting our minds on the spiritual and the good and especially by finding something to do for and with Christ.

If you weren't here last week, we got practical with the sermon and asked everyone to do something and no one to do nothing. It may be just a commitment to get yourself here and that's the service you can render to the church, or it may be helping us with our spring clean-up day. We had people sign up and some were completely covered and others not. Take a look at some of the places we still need help and sign up today. They're pretty simple, short-lived, single burst of service options.

Growing got me thinking about some of the growth areas that pastors probably think about covering every year in one form or another with their congregations – handling anger, handling depression, handling finances are examples.

We reached into the Sermon on the Mount last week, to the paragraph of conclusion about wise and foolish builders. One of the features of that sermon is that we are called upon to jettison from our lives anger and contempt. In fact, the good news is that because of

Christ coming into the world and becoming a helpful friend to us, we can actually become less angry and more content people. And what if it spread to the whole world??? Whoa! So today let's have the sermon be the kind of sermon maybe we should have every year-- on growing in Christ such that we get beyond anger.

See this picture. Let me ask you, "Do you know that feeling?" Some of you have experienced that (the image emotion) *from* you and found that on occasion it caused the end of a favorite dish (smash) or golf club (wrap it around a tree), or more seriously, the end of relationship, or a job. Some of you have experienced what the image was ... *coming at* you and you have flinches and fears and scars because of it. Some of you know that anger as *fire* like in the picture and others of you know it as *ice*, some as silence and some as loud mockery.



Aristotle said, "Anyone can become angry. That is easy. But to become angry with the right person to the right degree at the right time for the right purpose in the right way. That is not easy." Anger is a part of being alive but it is something not easy. To rightly handle anger is not easy. But that is exactly what the Bible instructs us to do. It doesn't tell us to pretend it isn't there. It tells us to rightly handle anger. Here's a verse to ponder: "Be angry and sin not. Do not let the sun go down upon your wrath." (Eph. 4:26)

By implication, Christians then, as part of what it means to be Christian, do not ignore anger in their lives,

do not proceed through life unstudied about it or undeveloped in managing it. So let us talk right now about ways to grow in managing anger. With God's help we *can* take certain steps to be less angry. If we will, we will be enriching our friendships, teaching others how to have good lives, and opening our lives in new ways to God.¹

One, let go of myths about anger. There are some things many of us think about anger that simply are not true. And as long as we think those things we will not be able to overcome anger.

Here's the first myth to let go of: something outside of ourselves causes our anger. Your phone doesn't work so you say, "**You** make me so mad!" Your car won't start and you pound the steering wheel and yell, "**You** make me so mad!" The drivers who go too slow. "**You** make me so mad!" The drivers who go too fast. "**You** make me so mad!" The wife who doesn't pick up her socks. "**You** make me so mad!"

But here's the truth: No thing and no one *makes* you or me mad. Your feelings are *yours*. Your feelings are your responsibility.

What happens is we experience an event and then there are feelings that follow it, in this case, anger. But in between the event and the feeling are thoughts and interpretations. The feelings actually come from those thoughts and interpretations.

Here's a sober example. A man was on the bus and his children were making a bunch of noise. Another rider looks over at them and thinks, "Hellion kids, slovenly father." Then that rider says, feeling anger and thinking

¹ James 1:20 says, human anger does not produce the righteousness God desires. Remove anger and a new righteousness becomes part of the picture.

that they are making her angry, “Why don’t you get your kids under control?” Event ... rowdy kids. Interpretation ... hellion kids, slovenly father. Feeling ... anger.

But the man replies, “Oh, we’re just coming from the hospital where their mom just died and I guess they don’t know what to do with themselves.” Same event ... kids rowdy. New interpretation or explanation. Different feelings ... not anger but sympathy.

Proverbs 23:7 says, “As a man thinks in his heart, so is he.” That’s what this is. Romans 12:1 says, “Be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” That’s what this is. Philippians 4:8 says, “Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right ... think on these things.” That’s what this is. Get hold of your thoughts.² For *you* with them make *you* angry.

Another myth: venting is necessary. It’s like a pressure cooker, if you don’t release it, you’ll explode. Isn’t it funny that we don’t do this with other emotions? If you don’t release that gratitude, you’re just going to explode gratitude all over. It won’t be pretty. If you don’t vent that joy, you’re just going to explode joy all over. It’s dangerous, man. If you don’t vent that love, it’s going to rupture out. So if it isn’t true for these other emotions, why does it get to be especially true for that one?

Proverbs 29:11 says, “A fool vents his anger.” Will you listen to popular ideas or the Bible? Venting anger just gets you practiced at it. It doesn’t go away. It’s like a flame that you give oxygen to.

In other areas we talk about how once we do something the first time, the second time it’s easier, the third time even easier. On a slippery slope we not only

² Paul uses the phrase in Col. 3:17, “Set your mind on things above,” indicating a powerful truth that we can direct our thoughts.

repeat more easily but we escalate. Maybe you have heard this with drugs ... marijuana to heroin. Why do we not apply the same reasoning here – that outbursts would become easier, more frequent, more intense?

Sometimes we vent with a third party. We call it processing. But too often what really happens is that we are simply rehearsing and getting more grooved with our thoughts about the matter. Matthew 18:5 says, “If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, *just between the two of you.*”

A final myth and then we go on. “I can’t control my anger.” That’s not true. I can prove it. How many times has it happened in how many families that there is an angry argument going on and the phone rings? People were calling each other names. Mid-sentence they pick up the phone and say sweetly, “Hello.” Sounds like controlling anger to me. How many times has it happened in how many families that there is anger in the car on the way to church? You step out of the car amid a bunch of church members and say sweetly, “Good morning.” Sounds like controlling anger to me. Anger can be controlled.

The second step to manage anger, after exploding the myths, is to slow down. James 1:19 says, “Be slow to speak, slow to anger.” Proverbs 14:17 says, “A quick tempered man does foolish things.” Slow down. Notice how many of the verses on your insert have the word, “slow.”

Psychologists speak of “cognitive incapacitation.” In the rising blood pressure, the adrenalin, and all that goes with rising anger, there is cognitive incapacitation. Like, you can’t think straight. It the reason the word “mad” means both angry and crazy at the same time. Whatever can be done not to rush into that zone, to back

out of the zone is a must, because when you're in it, you do, as the proverb said, foolish things. Even yell out, "Stop." Literally doing that can help slow you down.

Slow down by praying. There are prayers of anger in the Bible. Check out the written Psalm 137. Slow down and *write* the angry letter ... it's slower than the angry phone call. Write it but do not send it until you read it a day later and see if it still fits. Write it on paper. If it is on email, it is too easy to hit "Send." That's slowing things down. That's managing anger so we do not sin.

The third step of lowering anger in our world is to listen. Regularly angry people have anger-inducing thought patterns (which we talked about earlier). That's the inventory that is in their warehouse. But they also are not good listeners. James 1:19-20 said, "Slow to speak and slow to anger." However, the verse starts with, "Be swift to listen."

We need to listen in *two* directions. One is *to ourselves*. Ask, "Why am I angry? What's the hurt or the frustration or the fear behind it?" Then ask, "What do I want?" You can't get a satisfactory solution that will deal with the anger if you don't make explicit to yourself what it is you would like. Psalm 4:4 says, "Be moved with anger, and sin not; meditate in your own hearts upon your bed, and be still." That's what this means – listen to yourself.

But we also need to listen *to others*. When people don't listen well, they misinterpret. They get the wrong thoughts rolling. Or when they are angry they are not listening because they are thinking about their reply, their getting back, their winning, their pain. Sometimes they are listening to their hurt or anger before they even see the person much less hear him or her. Who are the

people doing these things? Us. But the Bible says to all of us, “Listen.”

Finally, lowering anger means that we need to act. Slowing down doesn't mean forever avoiding the issue. Listening doesn't mean never solving a problem. Think of anger as a fire alarm. It's good to have if there's a fire. But we don't want it going off all the time. If it is, we either have to fix the faulty battery or alarm so that it is not sounding (fix the anger-inducing thoughts) or there is a fire we need to put the fire out. What is the issue? In a sane, thoughtful way, where we have listened to the other and to ourselves, solve the problem. Jesus tells of bringing your gift to the altar and if you have a problem with someone, don't avoid it by worshipping. Rather, go and reconcile. (Matthew 6:23-24) Reconcile means solve the problem.

Finally, recognize the practical, regular sides of life and how they interact with ... anger. This is a miscellaneous but real category. I'm thinking of sleep and the woman who came out with one eye barely open and her kids said, “Did you wake up grouchy?” She replied, “No, I left your dad asleep.” When you are tired, aren't you more likely to be grouchy? Try to get your sleep.

I'm thinking of scheduling and how some people always act like a twenty-minute drive can be done in fourteen minutes. So they step on the gas, have their blood pressure up, and yell at slow pedestrians crossing the street. If you left an extra five minutes for everything and got everywhere ten minutes early, would you be less angry? Yes.

I'm thinking of finances. If you don't know where you are financially, you have an anxiety and you bite the head off of your husband for spending too much, your wife for spending too much. I have a son who is working

with a financial advisor right now and it's stressful for that couple. But it is going to save them from fights down the road, I am sure.

But all these things -- blow up the myths, slow yourself down, listen, act... to money, these are of a different order of something very important. That something very important is to marinate in the goodness of God. Do you believe you have a Heavenly Father who really does care for you? You don't just profess it but you actually believe it? Do you believe you have a Good Shepherd and you shall not want? Unless we know this at a very central level, we're going to be a little bit on edge inside. We're not going to be able to roll with the punches.

So to really find a life beyond anger we need to find ourselves calm because we are ... because of this God we are with ... completely ok.

May it be so.

If you would like to talk about this message or your spiritual life, or have someone pray with you, the pastor and elders would welcome your call.

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