

9.21.08

Disarming Our Anger

James 1:17-21

Douglas Scalise, Brewster Baptist Church

*“Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. In fulfillment of his own purpose he gave us birth by **the word of truth**, so that we would become a kind of **first fruits of his creatures**.*

You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God’s righteousness. Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness **the implanted word** that has the power to save your souls.”

Anger. The word itself has an ugly, unpleasant sound. Anger is a word we associate with screaming, yelling, things being broken, and even violence. Anger can be loud. Or anger can cause us to seethe in silence as we let it fester internally as resentment until it is triggered and we blow up. Anger produces a host of physical problems including ulcers, hypertension, and according to growing evidence anger can directly trigger heart attacks. Dr. Murray Mittleman, director of cardiovascular epidemiology at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center in Boston, did a study of more than 1,600 heart attack survivors, male and female, that showed in the two-hour period after someone feels intense anger, heart attack risk more than doubles.

Of all our emotions, anger is potentially the most destructive. Anger is *“A God-given emotional response that we all experience on occasion. Surrendered to God and used wisely, with control, it can have a positive result. Out of control, however, anger can have tragic consequences. Anger can be a response to unmet expectations; irritation or frustration when things don’t go our way; or a demonstration of hostility when someone has a different opinion. Anger can also be a defensive response to a hurtful attack or to a real or perceived threat to one’s self-esteem or well being.”*¹

In other words, not all anger is sinful; in fact, anger can lead to positive action, protection, justice, or change. One form of anger is righteous indignation, the kind of anger we feel when we witness or learn of acts of injustice, wickedness, violence, or greed that harm other people. This was the anger of Jesus when he drove people out of the Temple (Matthew 21:13-16). We need to be very careful about claiming our anger is righteous indignation because while we have Christ in us, none of us is Jesus.

¹ Rapha’s 12 Step Program for Overcoming Chemical Dependency, page 94.

While not all anger is wrong, uncontrolled anger frequently leads to sin and all manner of evil. Think of the phrases we use to describe what happens when we are angry. *"I lost control,"* which correctly suggests that anger is something we can learn to discipline and control with God's help.

"I wasn't myself," which is ridiculous when you think about it, of course you were yourself because you can't be anyone else.

What we mean is, *"I wasn't the self I want to be."*

"I blew my top, or I went ballistic," both convey the explosive and violent power of anger.

The Bible has a great deal to say about anger. Defusing and disarming anger so that it loses its destructive power in our lives is so difficult that Proverbs 16:32 says, ***"One who is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and one whose temper is controlled than one who captures a city."*** In other words, it is easier to capture a city by violent force than it is to overcome our own anger and temper. Psalm 37:8 says, *"Refrain from anger, and forsake wrath. Do not fret – it leads only to evil."*

Proverbs 14:17, 29, *"One who is quick-tempered acts foolishly, and the schemer is hated. Whoever is slow to anger has great understanding, but one who has a hasty temper exalts folly."*

Proverbs 15:1, *"A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger."*

These scriptures and many others all communicate the truth that there is a sense in which we are the greatest foe we face in our spiritual growth. And like Yosemite Sam, the spiritual growth of many people is plagued by the destructive power of anger.

In today's scripture from James, verse 19 describes *The Way Life Should Be*, *"let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger."* This is easier said than done.

Quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger is God's vision for human

relationships. However this is not always the way we act and behave. It sounds so simple, yet how many of us grew up in a home where this was the norm? Even now, how confident are we that our family and friends would describe us in this way? Or would they be more likely to say we are slow to listen, quick to speak, and quick to anger? For much of my life this has been a struggle for me – I have a tendency to be quick to speak – also an occupational hazard for a preacher. If I have grown in this area at all over the last 20 years, Jill deserves a lot of the credit.

James 1:20 portrays *The Way Life Is*. ***"Our anger does not produce God's righteousness."*** **When anger gets the best of us, it reveals the worst in us.** Anger can do tremendous damage to us personally, to our relationships, and to others.

Christians are not exempt from this behavior. One time when our family was on vacation, we went to worship on a hot summer Sunday at a place that did not have air conditioning. During worship, a young family was seated in front of my parents. One of the boys, who was about nine or ten, was fanning himself with an open hymnal. After a few minutes, the woman sitting in front of him, turned around and snapped, *“Do you know how annoying you are?”*

Ironically, the gospel lesson that morning was from Matthew 11 where Jesus says, *“Come to me all who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest.”*

Which do you think the boy will remember longer, the words of Jesus or the words of the angry woman? When people are with us, not just when we are at church but anywhere, we want them to remember how Jesus lives in us, and not destructive anger. By destructive anger I mean everything from verbal abuse like screaming, faultfinding, mean spirited criticism and sarcasm to physical abuse, even to murder.

Bernadette Fernandes' 10-year old daughter Trina was killed while she played in a park in Roxbury, MA on June 29, 2002 by a shotgun blast intended for a rival gang member. The two men charged in the crime went free after a mistrial was declared when it was learned that several jurors had lied about their criminal records. When Trina was shot, she lay in a coma for 36 hours at Boston Medical Center. “Fernandes took a home video of her comatose daughter and gave it to Channel 7, which aired it. She said she wanted gang members to see, close up, just what their violence had wrought. I want kids to think about the outcome, and I want them to see a mother, to see what they did to me and to my child.”

Forty days after her daughter died, Fernandes, who is a Christian, led a peace march. She has raised more than \$50,000 for a charitable fund in her daughter's name, which is used for children's arts and after school programs her daughter would have enjoyed. Fernandes said, *“You can win some people, but you cannot win all. My main message is to let kids know what violence can do. It can destroy a family. It can destroy their life. By the time you're sitting in prison thinking about what you've done, it's too late.”*

Even more remarkable is her attitude toward the men who were charged in her daughter's death. *“I wouldn't use the word 'hate.' I would use the word 'hurt.' I'm hurting, but I don't hate anyone. I hate what they did to my daughter, but I don't hate them. They are not going to destroy my life.”* Bernadette Fernandes is a great example of someone who lives much of what the Bible says about anger.

One person (David Seamands) observed that *“Anger is a divinely implanted emotion, part of God’s image in the human personality, and it is to be used for constructive purposes.”* Anger, like weeds, must be controlled. *“There must not be in it any malice, bitterness, resentment, or hate.”* It is hard for us to picture anger that is not entangled with those other emotions. Anger is to be carefully used for constructive spiritual purposes, such as overcoming injustice and combating evil.

Not all anger is sinful or bad; the key is how we handle and deal with it. Ephesians 4:26-27 says, **“Be angry but do not sin, do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil.”** This is the verse that my grandmother shared with Jill and I before we were married. **We make room for the devil when our anger is not controlled constructively but is let loose destructively.** Anger doesn’t have to be suppressed, but we must exercise care how it is expressed. Too often though anger is reactive -

“You got me, I’m going to get you back. He hit me first.” This just adds energy to the relational system and the cycle of anger continues.

Psalm 139:21-24 is a good example of how to defuse anger. David vents his feelings **to God in prayer**, before he interacts with anyone else, and he asks the Lord to **examine and search his own motives and feelings**. David prayed, *“Do I not hate those who hate you, O Lord? And do I not loath those who rise up against you? I hate them with perfect hatred; I count them my enemies. **Search me, O God, and know MY heart; test ME and know MY thoughts. See if there is any hurtful way in ME, and lead ME in the way everlasting.**”*

Because of the many trials he faced, David could have lost it numerous times. More than once he had the opportunity to kill his half-crazed father-in-law King Saul who was trying to kill him, but David didn’t give in to his anger. His comrades even advised David two times that God had given him the opening he needed to kill Saul but David refused (see 1 Samuel 24:1-17 {especially verse 17} and 1 Samuel 26:6-12). Even with the cries of God-sanctioned holy violence in his ears, David lifted up his hands in prayer to God rather than reaching down for his sword. *“Search me, O God, and know my heart.”* **David knew his own motives could not be trusted.** *“Test me and know my thoughts.”* David knew that his thoughts betrayed the reality of his own weakness and sinfulness. David also wrote in Psalm 4:4, **“When you are angry, do not sin; ponder it on your beds, and be silent.”** Too many people, rather than being silent, reach for the phone or their computer key board and start sharing their anger with the world. The

anonymity of blogs on the Internet that allows people to spew the most reviling, hateful, angry speech without having any accountability for what they say is unsettling to say the least.

James says we need to weed the garden of our own life, uprooting the weeds of anger, bitterness, and wickedness. Then we are to welcome the implanted word of God that has the power to save our souls. The foundational parable of Jesus is the parable of the sower who sows the seed of the word and it lands in four different kinds of soil. Some falls on the path, where the birds quickly eat it, rocky soil, springs up quickly but wilts when the sun beats down, some among thorns that choke out the good seed, and some falls on good soil and bears fruit 30, 60, 100 fold. That is the kind of soil we want to be for God's word. Reading, studying, and memorizing God's word is one of the most effective and important tools we have to not only to deliver us from our own anger but also to save our souls. **If it takes a very small thing to make us angry, that probably says something about the size of our spirit.** We can get upset about small things of relatively little eternal consequence, while not even noticing that HIV/AIDS has taken 45 million lives and left 15 million children as orphans.

Many of the scriptures I've mentioned this morning are worth committing to memory. If we can remember so much that is trivial, we can remember God's word that has the power to nourish and save our souls.

Anger gives the Adversary all kinds of opportunities to wreak havoc in our lives, our families, the church, and the world. But God's word can soften the hardest heart if we give it the opportunity.

Many centuries ago a wise Christian wrote, *"The nature of water is yielding, and that of stone is hard. Yet if you hang a bottle filled with water above the stone so that the water drips drop by drop, it will wear a hole in the stone. In the same way, the word of God is tender, and our hearts are hard. So when people hear the word of God frequently, their hearts are opened to the fear of God."*²

As we continue sloggng our way through the degradation that is a presidential campaign that bombards us on the web, on TV, and radio – with thousands of angry words, I hope we will all reflect on our own temper and how we handle anger. Perhaps Paul says it best in Romans 12:17-21,
"Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

² Desert Wisdom, page 59.

Beloved never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." No, "if your enemies are hungry, fed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

Prayer: Merciful God, thank you for loving me even when I am angry. I realize that cultivating anger damages my relationship with you and others and even myself. Thank you for forgiving me and giving me the freedom to forgive those who hurt me. Enable me to cope with situations that stimulate anger in me through your calm, Spirit dwelling within me. I am a new creation in Christ and I am not a slave to anger. Christ controls me and I yield my anger to him. Refresh me with your love and help me to walk by the Spirit each day. In Jesus' name. Amen.