

[Un]Acceptable Anger

Matthew 5.21-26

Mike Elliott • Dominion Covenant Church • June 28, 2009

Introduction

[Scripture reading, *Matthew 5.21-26*]

A. We are convicted of sin.

In Matthew's gospel, the Sermon on the Mount covers three whole chapters. Over and over again Jesus tells his audience, he tells us, that sin and righteousness are not just outward actions—they are a heart issue. Murder begins in the heart and adultery begins in the heart and true prayer comes from the heart. Jesus definitely affirms the Old Testament Law, as verses 17-20 so clearly state, and he piercingly reminds us that those commandments not only speak of actually killing someone or actually committing adultery, they also speak of the heart issues that lead to those actions. We must remember that in God's eyes those heart issues are just as deserving of judgment.

B. We are called to a higher life.

As part of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus calls us to a different way of living than the world expects. The sermon is filled with numerous calls to radical righteousness and many people wonder how relevant and reasonable those expectations are. Did Jesus expect his audience to be able to achieve this standard? does he expect *us* to achieve this standard? Or are they lofty ideals for a future age?

These are kingdom standards and we live in the kingdom age.

The fact is, most of what he says in this sermon is indeed radical and beyond the reach of mere humans; that's kinda his point! God isn't satisfied with what we can do by ourselves in our own strength. He desires much more of us. Knowing we can't do it he doesn't simply throw up his hands and say, "ok, fine, just be that way!"

C. We are given the ability to do it.

No, knowing we can't do it he promises a new heart and a new ability to do it. So if you ever find yourself saying, "God, I can't do that, it's way too difficult" you are partly correct—it is too difficult *for you to do by yourself*! The good news is that you aren't by yourself, you are not alone.

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Unsaved, lost people are doomed in their sin and they will never be able to do it right but as a Christian you have the Holy Spirit within you and you are expected & enabled to do it. That's the gospel, right? The good news is that God has interceded on your behalf and accomplished, is continuing to accomplish, something great inside you. If that fails to happen you haven't experienced the gospel and you are still locked in the bad news of sin and judgment.

In this sermon Jesus speaks to novices and tells them what it means to be a veteran expert who does great things. He explains how to gain that expertise, and better yet he sends his Spirit to each of his brothers and sisters—you and me—so that we can accomplish the standard he has set.

There are a whole host of challenges Jesus lays down but today we are going to address only one: his challenge to deal with anger. Are you ever angry? Perhaps you call it “frustration” or “getting upset”? “Oh, I got frustrated with my wife yesterday?” “I was upset with my brother last week.”

I. Sinful anger is anger that is ‘without cause’ (v22a).

From the outset we must be frank and call a spade a spade—unrighteous anger is sin. We call it by other names to make it more acceptable. God is not fooled by this tactic, he sees the problem, and he will judge it accordingly. So we must call unrighteous anger sin. Unrighteous anger is sin, as indicated by the words in verse 22, “**angry with is brother *without cause***”. If we neglect those words “without cause” we are left with a universal statement that all anger is wrong, leave us calling Jesus a sinner for the times he was angry.

Indeed, some anger is appropriate and is not sinful. In his letter to the Ephesians Paul says to “**be angry but do not sin**” (Eph 4.27). Thus there is righteous anger and there is unrighteous anger. There is anger that has a just cause, and therefore is righteous, and there is anger without a just cause that is sin.

A. Righteous causes.

Let's take a look at the righteous, therefore permissible, causes of anger. By way of example: God had righteous anger at Moses' unbelief (Ex 4.14), the mistreatment of strangers, widows, and orphans (Ex 22.21-24), worship of idols (Ex 32.10, Dt 6.14-15, Jud 2.13-14, Ezra 8.22), and the grumbling & complaining of his people (Num 11.1,10). Jesus had righteous anger at the Pharisees for their hardness of heart (Mk 3.5), improper worship

in the Temple (Jn 2.13-22), Peter for diminishing the importance of the atonement (Mt 16.23).

Further, it isn't just God who can have righteous anger. There are also examples of man's righteous anger: Moses was angry when Pharaoh refused to let the Israelites go (Ex 11.8) and later when he came down the mountain and saw the extent of the people's sin (Ex 32.1-20). David was angry when Nathan told him the story of injustice not knowing that he himself was the villain (2Sam 13.21). Paul was angry to learn about pervasive false teaching in Galatia (Galatians).

So, clearly, there are situations and conditions where righteous anger is appropriate.

B. Unrighteous causes.

On the flip side, there are occasions, far too many of them, of unrighteous anger.

Unrighteous anger may be caused by bitterness (Hebrews 12.15). The root of bitterness can bear fruit in conflict if we are not careful to dig it up.

Unrighteous anger may be caused by pride, or guilt, or hatred that leads to anger. All of these produce anger that is aimed at vindicating man. They do not produce what James (1.20) calls "the righteousness of God".

So, having established there is good anger and bad anger, we know that in our text Jesus is speaking of the bad variety. It is a sin.

II. Sinful anger is manifested in a variety of ways (v22b).

Note that this sin doesn't stay hidden. It is manifested in a variety of ways: in emotions (which are often seen), in words (which are heard), and in actions (which are often felt).

A. Angry emotions.

The first part of verse 22 speaks of those emotions. "...**whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment.**" Simply having angry emotions well-up inside you is enough to be considered guilty. The same is the case for other sins, for example lust. Simply entertaining lustful thoughts is a sin, long before it is manifested in the action of fornication or adultery. We must take seriously the emotions that start the slide down the slippery slope to destruction before they go further and involve other people.

Emotions in and of themselves are not sinful. God gives us emotions for a reason. The purpose of the emotion of anger is to motivate. The purpose of the emotion of fear is to get you out of trouble. It is a good thing to fear that oncoming train so you will get off the train tracks! A fearless person is not healthy. But in our sinful fallen state we pervert God's good gifts; we pervert anger into rage and fear into cowardice. So, don't try to be emotionless, but do be aware of what direction your emotions are heading.

B. Angry words.

Emotions are often manifested in words. The emotion of fear might be manifested in a yell, "Yikes!" or "Help!"

Pertinent to anger, the middle of verse 22 reads, "**and whoever says to his brother, 'Raca!' shall be in danger of the council and whoever says 'you fool' shall be in danger of hell fire.**" *Raca* is an Aramaic word that's an insult against someone's intelligence, along the lines of "you moron." The epithet "you fool" speaks of lacking wisdom. They are examples of angrily lashing out at a person through verbal abuse.

Note: Paul and Christ call people fools (Gal 3.1, Luke 11.40) so the words in and of themselves are not sinful; when they betray sinful anger they are sinful.

C. Angry actions.

Taking it a step further is adding angry actions to the angry words. Have you ever hit someone? or hit something? When I was a kid, probably 10 or 11, I got mad about something I can't even remember what, and stormed off to the bathroom where I no doubt slammed the door. I put my back to the wall and kicked my heel against it. Oops, I put a hole in the drywall! That was hard to cover up. I am sure I tried to come up with a good lie to explain it!

This shows that actions are very tangible and can be documented. Emotions may be hidden and words may be misunderstood, but actions speak very loudly and can speak loudly against us.

Heaven forbid our anger go so far as murder, as mentioned here in verse 21. Even if it doesn't go that far, there are ramifications for our angry actions.

Even if you don't commit murder you could be sent to prison. Let me share with you another story from my past. You didn't know I'd been to prison, did you? Just kidding, I haven't, but I've certainly done a few things

that broke the law! How about you? It is foolish and immature to think it's only the other guy that gets into trouble.

In this text Jesus commands us to make sure things don't go that sour. He tells us to resolve the situation quickly (v25) before a judge gets involved, you get taken into police custody, and you get thrown into prison.

Before we move on to the solution, to which I have already alluded, I want to emphasize two things: first, just because we don't get caught doesn't mean we aren't guilty. People may not notice you fuming inside or they may not notice your angry looks, and you may get away with punching a hole in a wall by blaming it on the furniture movers, but God sees all things and each man will be held accountable for his actions. Second, notice the escalation of the situation: thoughts lead to words and words can lead to actions. You may think you've stopped at step 1 ("Oh, I've only cursed at her inside my head. I've never actually spoken a harsh word to my wife.") but more than likely you have already, or soon will, curse at her with your lips. You may think you've stopped at step 2, saying it is healthy to shout and scream in order to let out the emotions (what the psychologists call venting) but right around the corner is the moment when the verbal volleys from your mouth are accompanied by physical volleys from your fist. It can happen. It does happen. More than likely it will happen unless... unless you solve the core issue of sinful anger.

III. Sinful anger has a solution (vv24-25).

A. Transform the anger.

We are fallen people who live in a fallen world. Because of this things are going to come along that ruffle your feathers. If nothing ever bothers you perhaps you are living in an uninformed dispassionate bubble.

When issues do arise that ruffle our feathers, too often we wish they would just go away, but sometimes they can't or won't. There may in fact be a very good reason for you to be angry.

So let's look at this checklist for transforming your unrighteous anger into righteous anger.

1. Godly anger is God-like—anger at the things God is angry at.

First, for your anger to be godly it must be like God's anger. Proverb 19.11 reads, "**The discretion of a man makes him slow to anger, And his glory is to overlook a transgression.**" You must be angry at the same things he is angry at and able to forgive or overlook when necessary.

Take the situation of a child: they just climbed up on the couch and knocked over the stack of books. Are you angry because the corner of your book got bent? Or are you angry because your child rebelliously disregarded the clear instruction you have given for him not to climb on the couch. God is angry with rebellion and it is necessary that we too be angry with rebellion.

God is angry when people don't meet his holy standard, thus it is proper for a parent to be angry when his child does not meet his standard. Of course, we must take care that we do not maintain an unholy standard or make the standard so complicated that it leads to the child being exasperated (Eph 6.4). Some parents make so many rules the kids have nowhere to turn.

That said, children must obey and honor their parents (Eph 6.1). Parents should be concerned when their children disobey. So, take a look at the actions of others or the events that are making you angry and ask yourself if they are things worth being angry over? If not, let them go by having love cover a multitude of sins (1Pet 4.8); if they are worthy of anger, deal with it appropriately.

Above all, God is primarily angry at the problem. He hates sin. We too should direct our attention to the problem rather than the person. Instead of saying, "You are lazy," try "I am concerned that your work is not getting done." That will start a process of finding out the source of the problem which will bring a solution into greater focus.

2. Godly anger is legal—in accordance with God's law, i.e. not vigilante justice (Dt 32.35).

Second, and this ties in with the first, our godly anger must be in accordance with God's law. While it does not say anywhere in Scripture, "thou shalt not climb up on the couch" it is proper for a parent to make such a rule for reasons of safety, respect for property, etc.

The punishment should also be according to God's law. God has given parents the authority of the rod, not of the sword. Interpersonal relationships, be they between spouses, friends, or parents & children, are not the venue for vigilante justice. Siblings should turn to their parents for justice, neighbors should turn to the courts, and church members should turn to the church leaders rather than taking things into their own hands and inflicting an illegal punishment.

So, once you have passed the first test and established the fact that the cause of your anger is righteous and worth troubling over, ask yourself if the

method or instrument of your anger is righteous? A spank may be appropriate, a verbal rebuke may be appropriate, bringing in a church leader may be appropriate, or calling the police may be appropriate.

3. Godly anger is not explosive, but is only slowly provoked—God has great compassion and is slow to anger (Ex 34.6).

Third, godly anger is not explosive or easily provoked. Proverb 29.11 reads, **“A fool vents all his feelings, But a wise man holds them back.”** Alarm bells should ring in your head when a person erupts. It could be you have been simmering for a long time and finally fresh fuel hit the burning embers. Verbal tirades, holding the spanking paddle with white knuckles, or hurling things across the room are clear signs that spirit-guided self-control is not at work. God has great compassion and is slow to bring his wrath to bear when he is angry. How much more should we, who certainly can’t see the whole picture and know perfectly what the situation is, be patient to seek out the truth and take the time to make sure we see things accurately.

When the kid knocks the books off the end table it is not wise to race over and grab him harshly and nearly break his arm while throwing him over your knee. Simply doing things slowly and deliberately will go a long way towards mitigating unrighteous anger. Walk the child into a private room to then administer discipline. The time it takes to move to the appropriate location will allow time for you to have the proper perspective.

Similarly, if an interaction with your spouse gets you riled up, say to him or her, “let’s go sit at the dining room table to talk about something that has been bothering me.” It will take a moment to get there. It will take another moment to formulate a prayer for God’s grace and mercy in your marriage. Then, it is much more likely your godly anger can be voiced in a godly way.

4. Godly anger does not take pleasure in wrath—God does not delight in judging the wicked (Ezek 33.11).

Fourth, we should also ask ourselves why we are angry in terms of what we hope to achieve by it? Are we desiring to prove we are right, smarter, stronger, or in control? Elsewhere in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus praises the meek and the peacemaker.

For an example from the workplace: it could be that your co-worker is clearly wrong, and you are in control of your emotions, and you could take the appropriate step of informing your boss; but are you really just trying to get them fired because it would bring you great satisfaction? God does not

delight in the death of the wicked and we should not rub our hands in pleasure at seeing someone's downfall. In Ezekiel we read of God's rebuke against Israel's enemies. They are going to receive special punishment because they were pleased at Israel's downfall saying, "Aha, aha!" We should be merciful, compassionate, and helpful.

We should be motivated by a desire to see the person restored to right relationship with the Lord, built up in godliness, and at peace with his family. If that is our goal, we have a target worth aiming for and a goal that God will be glad to bless.

B. Resolve the problem.

With these points kept in mind, we can see that Godly anger has a noble purpose: to solve a problem. Rather than stewing on something or grumbling about it or taking matters into your own hands, we must resolve it.

Sounds pretty straightforward, right?! How many times have you had an angry child come to you and you're your first thought is, "Why are you angry? Just solve the problem and get over it." Remove the problem and the kid isn't in a huff anymore. Of course some times it isn't easy but it goes without saying that if you can remove the cause of the anger, the anger will go away.

1. Seek out a resolution—if it is worth getting angry over, it must be resolved.

Why don't we do this first and do it quickly? You may resist seeking resolution because you actually like being angry (it often gives a feeling of power), or I may want the person to come to me to straighten things out (that's another way of clinging to power). Jesus' teaching is clear in verse 24, **"leave your gift there before the altar and go your way, first be reconciled to your brother."**

In the situation Jesus presents it would be very easy to say, "I'll do it later." After all, it took time and preparation to prepare the gift for the altar and it would be quite awkward and inconvenient to interrupt that procedure. Nonetheless, Jesus says to *first* be reconciled. The Apostle Paul touches on this same fact when he says, **"do not let the sun go down on your anger"** (Eph 4.26). It would be very easy to say to yourself, "I'll deal with this tomorrow." Nope, deal with it today. Deal with it now. Later is too late.

It is entirely possible that by going to the person and talking it through, the issue can be straightened out and the source of the anger

removed. Verse 23 “**your brother has something against you.**” Our text doesn’t tell us exactly the cause of the conflict though from verse 25 it sounds like he is in the right and you are in the wrong: “**Agree with your adversary**”. It could indeed be your brother has a good reason to have something against you, because you have sinned. Or it could be that he doesn’t have a good reason to have something against you and he is sinning. Or it could be a misunderstanding. If it was due to a misunderstanding, that can be clarified and you go away glad that you now see the situation clearly. If it was due to *their* sin, Lord willing, when you confront them gently they will see their error, repent, be forgiven, and everything will be ok. If it is due to *your* sin then you need to take a closer look at what is causing it and get that resolved.

2. Search for the source—look for underlying issues to prevent a re-occurrence.

This brings us back to the causes of unrighteous anger. If there is bitterness, that needs to be dealt with. If there is pride, that needs to be dealt with. Those underlying issues will stir up unrighteous anger and prevent the other problems from being dealt with in a righteous manner.

Conclusion

The issue of anger is critical for our day. The Counseling literature says that 90% of counseling cases involve anger either as a problem in itself or the cause of other problems. We learn from Jesus’ own lips that unrighteous anger is unacceptable—sins of the heart are sins indeed. We musn’t trick ourselves into thinking its no big deal, and we musn’t deceive ourselves by thinking we can handle it on our own. That first mistake denies the fact of God’s holy standard and the second mistake denies the fact of our sinfulness. Only by the work of the Holy Spirit can we overcome this sin and be enabled to achieve true holiness, thereby having our thoughts, words, and actions *all* be glorifying to God.

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