

Learning to Live Without Anger

July 31, 2022 Sermon by Stephen Portner

Matthew 5:21-22

²¹ "You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' ²² But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, 'Raca,' is answerable to the court. And anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell.

Recently I had a good friend remark to me that when I feel a certain way--whether it is frustration, depression, anger, sadness, whatever—it is helpful to reflect on why I feel that way before I react. That's pretty good advice. I find that many times when I get angry, for example, it is because I am tired, or in pain, or have some pre-existing condition where I was already feeling hurt and here was just one more thing that was enough to push me over the edge. Don't get me wrong. I think sometimes there are good reasons to be angry over something. Whenever I hear about abuse of children, for example, I get angry. There are other injustices that are imposed on other people that make me angry. I realize there were times when even Jesus got angry, like when he overturned the tables of the moneychangers in the temple (Matthew 21:12-13; John 2:13-22), or he was angry about the hypocrisy of the religious leaders of his day (Mark 3:5). But there are many, many more times when anger is not justified. Any more, our society seems to be hair-trigger when it comes to being angry, and that anger too often leads to violence.

There are different kinds of anger. A common type is visceral anger, the kind that hits us immediately, as when a waiter accidentally spills food onto our lap. There is very little lag time between the action and the reaction. It all happens very fast and our bodies react. We can work on this kind of anger, but it is not something we can prepare for. Jesus' apprentices can learn to respond differently to *visceral anger*, but this will take time.

A second type of anger, one that is more common and more damaging to the soul, is *meditative anger*. This kind of anger grows over a period of time. The more we stew on it, the worse it becomes. We can work on this anger more easily because we have more time to process the narratives that cause it.

Visceral and meditative anger are fueled by two ingredients, *unmet expectations* and *fear*, that, when united, ignite into a strong emotion. Unmet expectations are the occasion for anger.¹

¹ Smith, James Bryan. *The Good and Beautiful Life: Putting on the Character of Christ (The Apprentice Series Book 2)*. InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition.

For example, you see a friend at a store, say you haven't seen them in a long time, and you invite them to lunch. The day arrives; you are waiting in the restaurant and it's ten minutes past your meeting time, and still no friend. That was an unmet expectation. You're not immediately angry, but you do start to get concerned. Did something happen to your friend? The fear factor enters in. It gets to be twenty minutes past your meeting time. Still no friend. Is it possible you got stood up? You begin to have internal conflicts. Maybe this person doesn't want to be your friend any longer. Maybe your friend doesn't think you are good enough for them any longer. Your feelings of fear mixed with feelings of inadequacy begin to push your buttons, and you find yourself starting to simmer. A half hour late your friend finally shows up. They make an excuse that sounds kind of lame to you, and you feel as though they do not respect your time. You sit down to eat and your friend is glued to their smartphone and barely even takes the time to meet your eyes. The simmering turns into full-blown anger. How dare someone treat you like that? Now, what if it happened a different way and your friend shows up a half hour late with a gash on their head. You are no longer angry but are concerned and try to be understanding.

Our lives are full of unmet expectations. When they mount up and mount up, we become like pressure cookers. But instead of letting off a little steam, we become an explosion. We can't control our situations, so we get out of control. There are imperatives, expectations that we often have that are unrealistic and create a false narrative for us. They include:

- I am alone.
- Things always have to go as I want them.
- Something terrible will happen if I make a mistake.
- I must be in control all of the time.
- Life must always be fair and just.
- I need to anticipate everything that will happen to me today.
- I need to be perfect all the time.

"Each narrative is full of fear and the need to be in control. Our problem is fear, and we think control is the solution."² This need to be in control leads us to what Paul the Apostle refers to as "walking in the flesh." That doesn't refer to the flesh on our bodies but rather to relying on our resources to solve all our problems. Instead of relying on our own resources, we learn to realize that we need to depend on God.

In Jesus' Sermon on the Mount Jesus challenges us about our anger. Whereas before we might think that as long as we don't have murder on our mind, then we are okay to be angry with another person. But Jesus says to his disciples, which by extension includes us, that when you are angry with a brother or sister in Christ, you are liable to judgment. Jesus understands that the heart that is full of anger, and therefore, a heart that is full of hatred, is not far from a heart that would do murder, if the person could get away with it.

² Ibid.

Some people cannot imagine learning to live without anger, but Jesus through his Sermon on the Mount, indicates that it is possible. Otherwise, he would not have brought it up. If we think we can learn to live without anger without God's help, then we will only get more angry and resentful, because it is impossible. When we realize that God is the one who is in control and that his perfect love casts out all fear, then we are able to get a better handle on our anger issues.

The apostle Paul counsels, "Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil" (Ephesians 4:26-27). By saying "be angry" Paul is not encouraging anger. He recognizes it is a part of life, and instead of repressing it he instructs that we should not let the sun go down on our anger. Archibald Hart explains, "Paul is saying here that it is not the anger itself (the feeling) that is wrong, but that anger has the potential for leading you into sin. To feel anger, to tell someone that you feel angry, and to talk about your anger are both healthy and necessary."

When we let the sun go down on our anger, we allow it to poison our souls. This is why Paul follows with the warning "do not make room for the devil." The Greek word for "room" is *topos*, which means "place or footing." Unexpressed and unresolved anger give the enemy a foothold to work from. Anger easily can be turned into resentment (Why does she always neglect me? or He always gets what I deserve) and despair (Life is unfair, why even try?). So we need to examine the cause of our anger. Perhaps it is righteous anger, which can lead us to correct an injustice.³

However, many times our anger is not righteous, spurred on by the false narratives we have in our lives, and those impulses lead to more anger, and possibly violence. Someone does something to us, then we take it out on somebody else, then that somebody else goes home and kicks the cat.

And if you are the sort of person who sneers at everybody and calls them names, the fire inside you may eventually become all that's left of you, as **Gehenna**—the smouldering garbage dump of ancient Jerusalem—may take you over completely.

What's the alternative? Jesus offers two remarkably specific and practical commands. Be reconciled; make friends. How simple that is—and yet how hugely difficult and costly! It will almost certainly involve climbing down from the high pedestal on which you have placed yourself, abandoning your position of superiority over the person you're angry with. But genuine humans don't live on pedestals; they have their feet on the ground, on a level with everybody else.⁴

... All this is, of course, impossible. That is, it's impossible until you look at Jesus. As we continue through [the Sermon on the Mount], we discover that our natural question ('How can people possibly do what he says?') is eventually answered. Jesus himself refused to go

³ Ibid.

⁴ Tom Wright, [Matthew for Everyone, Part 1: Chapters 1-15](#) (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2004), 44.

the way of anger. Instead, he took the anger of his enemies within Israel, and of Israel's own enemies, the Romans, on to himself, and died under its load. From that point on, reconciliation is not simply an ideal we might strive for. It is an achievement, an accomplishment, which we in turn must now embody.⁵

Learning to live without anger will take time and patience and practice, seeking God's guidance and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit to lead us into a good and beautiful life.

⁵ Tom Wright, [*Matthew for Everyone, Part 1: Chapters 1-15*](#) (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2004), 45.