Anger Management

Vienna Presbyterian Church
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Ephesians 4:26-5:2

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Anger is a universal human emotion. A pressure point, to be sure. Anger is common to all men and women, to all ages and cultures. Some of us are forthcoming about expressing our anger. Others of us attempt to suppress it.

My go-to quote on anger originates from something novelist Frederick Buechner writes in his book *Wishful Thinking*: “Of the Seven Deadly Sins, anger is possibly the most fun. To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll over your tongue the prospect of bitter confrontations still to come, to savor to the last toothsome morsel both the pain you are given and the pain you are giving back—in many ways it is a feast fit for a king. The chief drawback is that what you are wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton at the feast is you.”

Buechner is spot-on. There is something perversely satisfying about the deadly sin of anger. Anger wants the people who hurt us to feel the same hurt in return. It’s called payback. Yet we pay a steep price for our anger. “The chief drawback,” Buechner concludes, “is that what you are wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton at the feast is you.” Anger can eat us alive.

Paul addresses anger head-on in chapter 4 of his letter to the Ephesians. Let me take you back to Ephesians. We preached a sermon series from Ephesians last year. The first three chapters of Ephesians center on theology—what Christians believe about God, the world and ourselves. The last three chapters of Ephesians pivot to matters of practical
ethics—how Christians are to behave in light of what we believe.

At the end of chapter 4, Paul provides the church in Ephesus with a representative list of ethical imperatives to govern their life as members of the body of Christ. Anger is chief among them.

One myth that perpetuates in Christian circles is that it is a sin to be angry. It is, after all, one of the Seven Deadly Sins. Yet, note carefully what Paul writes in verse 26: “Be angry but do not sin,” which originates from Psalm 4:4. In this verse, Paul differentiates feelings of anger from the sin of anger.

I can think of at least two instances in which anger is not sinful. First, anger is not a sin at its inception. Anger is an instinctive, emotional reaction to a perceived threat. We do not choose to feel anger. Anger comes upon us as a sudden, involuntary response. What we do with our angry feelings determines whether it is sin.

The second type of anger that does not qualify as sin is what we call righteous indignation, which is anger against injustice. We express righteous anger for injustices like human trafficking and child abuse.

Jesus displays righteous indignation against money-changers in the temple. He expresses anger when he overturns their tables and improves a whip to scatter them in every direction. His accompanying words, “You will not
make my Father’s house into a den of thieves,” has righteous anger written all over it (Matthew 21:13).

Even justified anger can easily degenerate into the sin of anger. Whether or not it is a sin to be angry, it is hard not to sin when we become angry. Anger is only one letter short of danger. Whether or not anger is sinful, it is most certainly dangerous.

Aristotle wrote about anger: “Anybody can be angry—that is easy, but to be angry with the right person, to the right degree, at the right time, for the right purpose and in the right way—that is not easy.”

In the next verse, Paul attempts to put limits on anger: “Do not let the sun go down on your anger” (4:26). If anger incubates for long periods, it will do considerable damage. Sunset functions as an appropriate time limit for a wide range of activities in Scripture, like paying common laborers a fair wage. I came across a commentary on this verse from an early second century document that implored Christians to “Bear no rancor from one day to the next.” Do not take anger to bed with you. It will consume you. Buechner’s words replay in my mind, “The skeleton at the feast is you.”

In verse 27, Paul advises his readers “Do not give the devil a foothold.” The devil will exploit the smallest opening to gain mastery over us. Do not give the devil an inch. He will take a mile. Give him a foothold and he will turn it into a stronghold.

Paul strings together a number of related words for anger in verse 31: “Get rid of all bitterness, rage, anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice (4:31). Note
the progression in this verse from inward impulses like bitterness to outright slander and malice. Prolonged anger destroys families and friendships.

One of the myths that perpetuates about anger is that venting pent-up anger is healthy and has cathartic benefits. Carol Tavris, in her book *Anger: the Misunderstood Emotion*, observes that we do not store anger any more than we store positive emotions. We never say we will explode if we don’t express joy or gratitude. We release anger not by expressing it but by resolving the problem.

A woman approached the famous evangelist Billy Sunday after he preached a sermon about anger. She attempted to rationalize her anger by saying, “There’s nothing wrong with losing my temper. I blow up and it’s all over.” Billy Sunday replied, “So does a shotgun and look at all the damage it leaves behind.”

Consider the Proverb, “Only fools give full vent to their anger” (29:11).

So what difference does this sermon make in my life? I offer three applications for your consideration today.

First, deal with your anger directly. Do not go around the barn to draw people into your disputes who are not immediately involved. Do not make the conflict bigger than it needs to be. Go directly to the source.
Dealing with anger directly can help us determine whether our anger is justified. So much anger results from everyday misunderstandings.

I recall a story about a Quaker woman seated in a Society of Friends meeting. She was seated across the room in a Quaker meeting from a man wearing a shirt that read, “Support Your Right to Bear Arms.” She was livid that someone would wear such a shirt to a Quaker gathering, since Quakers are pacifists by background. She fussed and fumed through the entire meeting. She imagined him to be an infiltrator with the National Rifle Association.

After the meeting, as everybody gathered for fellowship, she discovered that she had misread the man’s shirt. It actually read, “Support your Right to Arm Bears.” So much of our anger originates from misunderstanding.

I have had to learn through the years how to deal with anger directly. I am a classic conflict-avoider. Conflict makes me uncomfortable. You can ask my family or church staff about it. Yet avoidance is worse. I can attest from personal experience. The direct approach is far superior.

Second application—deal with anger promptly. Do not let your anger fester. Deal with it before it becomes unleashed with all of its fury.

Let me circle back to Paul’s injunction in Ephesians about not letting the sun go down on our anger. I am not always able to deal with my anger by sundown. I need time to cool
down. We have a saying in our family: “Give it the 24 hour rule.”

We may need time to sort out what to say and how to say it, but let’s not deceive ourselves into thinking we can get away with saying nothing. Denying anger causes us to resort to more subtle forms of anger. Chief among them is what we call passive-aggressive behavior. As the name indicates, passive-aggressive is the tendency to engage in indirect expressions of hostility through subtle put-downs or the silent treatment. Deal with your anger promptly, before it escalates into something worse.

My third and final application is more expansive. Ask for God’s help in dealing with your anger. We need God’s intervention to put anger in its place.

I said at the outset that anger is a universal emotion, common to both men and women. Another myth that perpetuates in our day is that men are angrier than women. Actually, men and women experience equal amounts of anger. Men are more aggressive with their anger and more prone to angry outbursts while women tend to hold on to it longer.

Ask for God’s help in dealing with your anger. You may need help in controlling your anger. You may need help in communicating anger in constructive ways.
Some of you may be saying to yourself “I do not have a problem with anger”. I wouldn’t be so sure. You may think everything is fine, yet the people around you think otherwise.

We read in Scripture, “The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in love. He will not always accuse, nor will he harbor his anger forever (Psalm 103:8). Consider all the places in Scripture where God is described as slow to anger and abounding in love (Psalm 86:5, 15; 145:8; Exodus 34:6; Nehemiah 9:31; Numbers 14:18; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2; Nahum 1:3). We ask for God’s help in controlling anger because the Lord is slow to anger and rich in love.

Jesus can help us with anger management issues. People’s runaway anger led to Jesus’ mock trial and subsequent death on the cross. On the cross, Jesus models how to deal with anger. He offers his life as sacrifice for our sins. The best way I know to deal with anger in the right way is to contemplate the enormity of God’s love for my own life. How can I harbor anger against other people for minor disputes when God shows me mercy for my major infractions?

Jesus, save us. Jesus, help us. This Jesus, who showed us God’s heart as slow to anger and rich in love, can help resolve our anger management issues. Ask him to help you deal with anger directly and promptly. Bring your anger to Jesus and leave it there. Ask him to help you sort it out. Each of us has three choices available to us. We can shelf it, shove it onto others or give it up to God.