

Hot Topic: Anger

A couple of weeks ago we discussed forgiveness and the need for us to be able to forgive those who have offended us. We learned that the first step in forgiving someone is giving up the right to hurt them in return. But often when we are angry, we want very much to see them hurt as we have been hurt. So that led to our discussion tonight on how can we overcome our anger.

This is especially difficult for people today for it almost seems that we have created a culture of anger and contempt, and anger has become almost a normal state of existence. It seems for many of us that we are always angry about something. Or if we are not currently angry, we can quickly become angry, often over things that are not that important.

Jesus, however, taught that anger is not normal and is indeed harmful. He also taught that if we are going to experience His Life and be part of the Father's family, then we must be able to set aside our anger. Jesus' teaching is very much counter to the popular culture of today. It was even radical for His time.

READ: Matthew 5:21-22 (NLT)

²¹“You have heard that our ancestors were told, ‘You must not murder. If you commit murder, you are subject to judgment.’ ²²But I say, if you are even angry with someone, you are subject to judgment! If you call someone an idiot, you are in danger of being brought before the court. And if you curse someone, you are in danger of the fires of hell.

Jesus describes three levels of anger here. The first one is what we today would simply call anger. It is when we get angry at someone because of what they did or did not do.

Anger is an automatic response that God placed within us as a vital function in life. When something threatens us or is trying to do harm to us or those we love, we naturally get angry. As such, it is not wrong. But in our fallen nature, it has become something more.

Webster's dictionary describes anger as an intense emotional state induced by displeasure. The primary function of anger in life is to alert me to an obstruction to my will, and immediately raise alarm and resistance, before I even have time to think about it.

To feel anger is not wrong. To choose to be angry, to actively receive it and decide to indulge it is wrong.

Instances where anger is wrong:

- When anger is selfish
- When anger controls our thoughts and actions
- When the anger becomes the dominant feature of our life
- When it involves brooding or fretting
- When we keep a running record of how we have been mistreated

Hot Topic: Anger

- When we have to pretend that we are not angry
- When we decide to attack the person with whom we are angry, or we attack or hurt a substitute

Instances when anger may be appropriate:

- When we or someone we love are in immediate physical or emotional danger
- When our trust has been deeply violated
- As part of the grieving process (Shock, Anger, Rejection, Acceptance, Healing)
- When injustice prevails

But even in these situations, it is neither healthy nor normal to remain angry.

READ: Ephesians 4:26,27,31,32 (NLT)

²⁶And “don’t sin by letting anger control you.” Don’t let the sun go down while you are still angry, ²⁷for anger gives a foothold to the devil. ...
³¹Get rid of all bitterness, rage, anger, harsh words, and slander, as well as all types of evil behavior. ³²Instead, be kind to each other, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God through Christ has forgiven you.

Notice that Jesus uses the same words for the penalty of anger as the Law did for the crime of murder. In both cases, we are “subject to judgment.” In doing so, Jesus is showing us that anger, by itself, does harm to people, and he is showing us how precious people are to God.

Anger hurts both the target of the anger and the source of the anger. Dallas Willard wrote, “When I discover your anger at me, I am *already* wounded.” He goes on to write, “Your anger alone will every likely be enough to stop me or make me change my course, and it will also raise the stress level of everyone around us. It may also evoke my anger in return. Usually it does, precisely because your anger places a restraint on me. It crosses my will. Thus anger feeds on anger.”

And anger hurts the person who is angry. Empirical studies have shown that many people are killed by their own anger, and untold many others die of secondhand anger.

And Jesus says this must stop. We are literally killing ourselves and those around us. And this has become so natural in our society that we do it almost unthinkingly.

Jesus then goes on to describe a level of anger that today we would call contempt. Contempt is worse than just simple anger. Contempt degrades the value of the other person. “You are an idiot.” We call them names, stereotype them, classify them, and imply unworthy motives for them.

Hot Topic: Anger

Jesus says that this is a higher offense, one that is worthy of being singled out by the highest authorities in the land which at that time was “the council” or the Sanhedrin in order that they might receive an appropriate and obviously serious penalties.

Proverbs 18:21 states, “The tongue can bring death or life.” When we speak words of contempt to or about someone, we are speaking sentences of death to their souls.

And Jesus says this must stop. Yet contempt has become an art form and a way of life. Our language has almost become standardized around terms of contempt which no longer pierce our conscience while continuing to mortally wound other people’s hearts.

Then Jesus ends this segment describing a level of anger that today we would call malice. Today the term “fool” is one more of contempt or even jest. But in Jesus’ time, to call someone a fool was to do irreparable damage to his character and his standing in the community. This is anger with the desire to wish harm or hurt on the person. The NLT is more accurate when it translates it as to curse someone.

Jesus saw this type of attitude as being so contrary to life in the Kingdom and so devastating to the person being attacked that he said the only punishment sufficient for the crime is to place the offender in danger of hell’s fire. In other words, it is not possible for people with such attitudes towards others to live in the presence of God’s Kingdom, for they are totally out of harmony with it.

We have religious people who won’t use the word “fool” because of this scripture, yet they will secretly desire in their hearts that a person will receive harm or “get what’s coming to them.” We won’t call someone a fool, but we will tell them to go to hell. While this may have become a common phrase in our culture today, it’s intent is the same. The speaker is desiring or wishing pain and suffering on the person.

And Jesus says this must stop. There is no place for malice in the Kingdom of God.

But how? If it is so much a part of our nature, so deeply ingrained into our culture, then what hope do we have of being able to do this?

Some things we can do to help with anger:

- Ask the Holy Spirit to deepen our understanding of what anger really is and what it really does to us and those around us. David prayed, in Psalm 119:144, “Your laws are always right; help to understand them so I may live.”

Hot Topic: Anger

- Invite the Holy Spirit to change our nature so anger is not always our immediate response. Ask Him to remove the anger we may already have. Submit to however He may want to work in our lives.
- Release any anger we have to God. Direct your anger towards God and present to Him the hurt you feel. David wrote in Psalm 59:11-13, “Don’t kill them, for my people soon forget such lessons; stagger them with your power, and bring them to their knees, O Lord our shield. Because of the sinful things they say, because of the evil that is on their lips, let them be captured by their pride, their curses, and their lies. Destroy them in your anger! Wipe them out completely! Then the whole world will know that God reigns in Israel.” Then ask God to help you release the anger. David ended his prayer with “But as for me, I will sing about your power. Each morning I will sing with joy about your unfailing love. For you have been my refuge, a place of safety when I am in distress.”
- Ask the question, “Why am I angry?” Usually there is an underlying emotion. Find that emotion or cause, and work on it.
- Ask the question, “What do I really want?” In doing so, we may find that what we thought we wanted which kept us angry is not what we really wanted at all.
- Don’t let anger build up. Deal with problems on a regular, daily basis. “Don’t let the sun go down while you’re still angry.”
- Understand that we can control and restrain the expression of our anger. Proverbs 29:11 says, “A fool always loses his temper, but a wise man hold it back.”
- Ask ourselves, “Am I willing to choose God’s way through this or am I insisting on my way of handling it?”

Paul writes in Colossians 3,

READ: Colossians 3:8, 10, 12-14 (NLT)

⁸But now is the time to get rid of anger, rage, malicious behavior, slander, and dirty language. ... ¹⁰Put on your new nature, and be renewed as you learn to know your Creator and become like him.

¹²Since God chose you to be the holy people he loves, you must clothe yourselves with tenderhearted mercy, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. ¹³Make allowance for each other’s faults, and forgive anyone who offends you. Remember, the Lord forgave you, so you must forgive others. ¹⁴Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds us all together in perfect harmony.

Let us make this our prayer each day, and we will be amazed at what the Spirit of God can create in our community, and the peace we will experience within our lives.