

Good anger, Bad anger

Message for Sunday, April 7, 2013
by Bruce Fraser

Ephesians 4:26, NLT

“Don’t sin by letting anger gain control over you.”
Don’t let the sun go down while you are still angry.

Scripture: Galatians 5:22-23, Ephesians 4:26

Children's Message:

There was a little boy with a bad temper, who would fly off in a rage at the slightest thing. His father wanted to help him change his behaviour, so he gave him a bag of nails and told him that every time he lost his temper, to hammer a nail in the back fence.

It was a hard task. The first day the boy drove 37 nails into the fence. *Have a board, hammer and 3½" nails with me. Invite each child to pound a nail in. When they realize how much work that is, they get the point.*

When he saw all those nails, for just one day, he began to understand that he had a problem. Besides, it was hard work, stopping what he was doing and going out to the back yard with the hammer 37 times in a day. He figured it was easier to hold his temper than to drive those nails into the fence. And so he gradually began to get angry less each day.

Finally the day came when the boy didn't lose his temper at all. He told his father about it and the father suggested that the boy now pull out one nail for each day that he was able to hold his temper. It took a few months, but the young boy was finally able to tell his father that all the nails were gone. The father took his son by the hand and led him to the fence. He said, “You have done well, my son, but look at the holes in the fence. The fence will never be the same. When you say things in anger, they leave a scar just like this one. It won't matter how many times you say I'm sorry, the wound is still there.”

The Bible tells us that losing our temper is not good. But it also tells us the answer: give our lives to Jesus, and let his Holy Spirit dwell in us. Then we will have the “fruit of the Spirit” — that's how Jesus helps us to change our life. One of these is patience, and another is self-control.

Sermon

1) Anger is OK; but don't lose control

Billy Sunday was a travelling preacher. At one church, a woman apologized for her frequent flare-ups by telling Billy, “Yes, I have a bad temper, but it's always over in a moment.” He replied, “So is a shotgun blast! But look at the damage it can do in just a split second!”

We all can see that anger can cause trouble. But anger in itself is not wrong; it's not a sin.

The anger can “lead you into sin,” but it's not a sin in itself. There is a proper time and place for anger, such as when you encounter injustice and evil. The sin is when you don't control your anger. “Don't let the sun go down on your anger.” Well, you can't control the sun, so that must mean, “Control yourself.”

Anger is an emotion, just like happiness and sadness. You don't have much control over how you feel; but you do control what you do with those feelings.

It is possible to control your anger. I can prove it to you. Some years ago, I was part of a group working with men to stop violence against women. A police officer told our group that when he investigates a family dispute where a husband has assaulted his wife and started smashing things around the house, there is a very obvious pattern: the only things that get broken are the things that were valuable to the woman. None of his toys are touched. He hasn't gone wild; he knows exactly what he is doing.

Here's another example: you're yelling at your kids and stomping around the house like a mad rhinoceros. The phone rings. You pick it up and in a calm, sweet voice say, “Hello.” You can turn your control off and on just like a light switch.

However, I wouldn't advise you to control your anger the way one woman did it. Her husband said to her one day, “When I get mad at you, you never fight back. How do you control your anger?” She replied, “I clean the toilet.” He was confused, and asked, “How does that help?” The wife answered, “I use your toothbrush.”

Again: Don't let your anger lead you into sin.

2) Is anger ever good?

But the question was put to me by one of the Bible Study groups: is there such a thing as good anger? If so, when would that be appropriate? What would it look like or feel like? How could we use it for good, instead of destroying things and people?

I suggest the best way to answer this is to ask: Did Jesus ever get angry? If so, then I think it would be fair to conclude that this was good anger; for the Bible says that Jesus never did wrong.

a) Sabbath Law vs. compassion

The Gospel of Mark tells of Jesus being at the synagogue for worship on the Sabbath, and there meeting a man with a paralyzed hand. Jesus has compassion on this man, and wants to heal him. But he

also feels the tension in the room: some in the room hate him and would love to be able to accuse him of breaking the commandments, such as “Do not work on the Sabbath day.”

Mark 3:4-5, Today’s English Version:

Then he asked the people, “What does our Law allow us to do on the Sabbath? To help or to harm? To save someone’s life or to destroy it?”

But they did not say a thing. Jesus was angry as he looked around at them, but at the same time he felt sorry for them, because they were so stubborn and wrong.

Source of anger: people’s lack of compassion; people following the letter of the Law, but totally missing the spirit of the Law. The purpose of God’s commandments is to give life, not to stifle it.

Jesus’ response: healing the person in need; sorrow for the others.

b) Children considered unimportant

Mark 10:13-16, Today’s English Version:

Some people brought children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them, but the disciples scolded the people. When Jesus noticed this, he was angry and said to his disciples, “Let the children come to me, and do not stop them, because the Kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I assure you that whoever does not receive the Kingdom of God like a child will never enter it.” Then he took the children in his arms, placed his hands on each of them, and blessed them.

Source of anger: treating children as being unimportant

Jesus’ response: delighting in children, and teaching the others that children are important.

3) Anger is like gasoline: it can cause an explosion, or it can power an engine to do good

In both of these examples, Jesus became angry over the way some people were mistreating other people. What made it even worse was that they thought they were doing God a favour: in the first case, they were scolding, “You can’t heal on the Sabbath; that’s evil!” In the second case, the disciples were saying, “Scram you little brats; Jesus is busy doing God’s work.”

But the key here is how Jesus used that anger: instead of lashing out at people, telling them they are stupid and useless, instead of resorting to violence, he turned that

anger to a positive, constructive purpose. Instead of exploding, he channelled that anger for good.

What I’m getting at here is this: anger in and of itself is neither good nor bad. It’s our natural response when we see wrong things happen. The key is: what do we do with that anger? Does it have positive results, or does it result in disaster?

a) Temple being used to cheat people

There’s one other episode in Jesus’ life where he appears to be angry. The Temple in Jerusalem was the heart of the Jewish religion. That was where people brought animals to sacrifice to the Lord. But the animals had to be perfect. The inspectors would almost always find a defect in the animals people brought from home. “Sorry, you can’t use that animal. But you can buy an animal for your sacrifice at our market conveniently located right over here in the Temple.” (And pay the hugely inflated prices on those animals.) And then when they go buy the animal, “You can’t use that pagan Roman money in here; this is God’s holy Temple! You have to use Temple coins. Don’t have any? No problem. We have a place conveniently located right here in the Temple where you can change your Roman money to Temple coins.” (And again, pay the exorbitant exchange rate.)

We can imagine that Jesus was appalled at how Temple worship was being used to gouge people. He said,

Luke 19:46, New Living Translation:

“The Scriptures declare, ‘My Temple will be a place of prayer,’ but you have turned it into a den of thieves.”

John 2:15, Today’s English Version:

So he made a whip from cords and drove all the animals out of the Temple, both the sheep and the cattle; he overturned the tables of the moneychangers and scattered their coins.

It doesn’t say that he was angry, but I can well imagine that’s what he was feeling as he did that.

Source of anger: Once again, people are misusing religion. In this case, worship being used by corrupt religious leaders to get rich.

Jesus’ response: Drive out the offenders; put a stop to the business.

Yes, it certainly is true that Jesus resorted to violence in this instance. But the violence is restrained. He doesn’t attack people, aiming to harm them. He’s only driving them out of the Temple. He doesn’t lose control of himself, and go into a rage.

May I humbly suggest that you and I are not Jesus. If we allow anger to turn into violence, we are in very dangerous territory. It is so easy to slip over the line from anger over abusing someone, to becoming like the abuser ourselves.

The Greek philosopher Aristotle put it this way:

Anyone can become 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. — Aristotle

Anger can result in damage to others we are not even aware of. A friend of Philip Yancey had a marriage that had gone through rough times. One night George passed a breaking point and emotionally exploded. He pounded the table and floor. “I hate you!” he screamed at his wife. “I won’t take it anymore! I’ve had enough! I won’t go on! I won’t let it happen! No! No! No!”

Several months later his friend woke up in the middle of the night and heard strange sounds coming from the room where his two-year-old son slept. He went down the hall, stood outside his son’s door, and shivers ran through his flesh. In a soft voice, the two-year-old was repeating word for word with precise inflection the climactic argument between his mother and father. “I hate you. ... I won’t take it anymore. ... No! No! No!”

George realized that in some awful way he had just passed on his pain and anger and unforgiveness to the next generation. Is not that what is happening all over the world now? Apart from forgiveness, the monstrous past may awake at any time from hibernation and devour the present - and even the future.

4) Alternative to anger: God’s peace

Let’s take one last look at Jesus. The soldiers have thrown him to the ground. They are driving spikes through his hands, nailing him to the cross. If ever Jesus had cause to be angry, this is it. He said earlier that he could call twelve legions of angels to come to his aid; but he did nothing. Actually, he *did* do something: he said this: “Forgive them, Father! They don’t know what they are doing” [Luke 23:34].

Jesus suffering on the cross can be a powerful antidote to anger. Dennis Ngien was in the former Czechoslovakia on a preaching tour. On the plane home a government official spoke to him. He told him that he had attended the service when Dennis had spoken about Christ’s suffering for his people, and he had left the service in rage, cursing God for the suffering he and his family had

known: 40 years of suffering under Communist rule; the starvation and death of his parents; the long years he had spent as a lonely child in an orphanage.

His rage continued when he arrived home. On the apartment wall hung a crucifix, given to him by his mother with the prayer that one day he would come to Christ. Furious, he hurled a cake topped with thick, white icing at it. The icing covered the crucifix, dripping down the face of the crucified figure. And in that moment, Dennis’ words about Christ’s suffering came alive to him. For the first time, he said, he saw Jesus’ tears. In his apartment, he knelt in front of the cross and gave his life to Christ. And he uttered these words: “Christ is for me, not against me.”

The man told Dennis: “I don’t understand many of the things that happened politically, but I know that Jesus did not forsake me. He was in pain when I was in pain. He was in tears when I was in tears.” Rather than vainly trying to understand why he had suffered so much, he was content to trust his life to the One who suffered with him.

Anger has a place in our lives. But don’t let it take over. Use that anger for good, not to destroy. And trust that Jesus is with you through it all.

Let’s pray about this. I invite you to join me in this prayer.

Lord Jesus Christ,
I ask you to come in and fill me with your Holy Spirit. Not only right now, but every day, all day. For without you, I do not have the power, the peace and especially the patience that I need.

Why am I sometimes lacking in patience? Is it because I have shut you out of my life? Have I turned away from you by sinning? Have I been ignoring you?

Lord Jesus, I’m sorry for the wrong things that I’ve done. Please forgive me, I pray. I *do* love you, and want to follow you and serve you. I ask you to help me to live the way you and I *both* want me to live.

Especially right now, I pray for patience. Show me where and when and with whom I need more patience... Oh Lord, that’s hard! But it would be so wonderful if I could. So please help me, I pray. Amen.