

Sept. 28: A Biblical View of Anger (part 3)

Just a quick reminder that you can find Equipping Hour notes, and now recordings as well, on the church center app.

We have arrived at our third and final week in our examination of anger. We began by looking at how the secular world defines, explains, and “fixes” anger through various theories and practices. The big takeaway from that week is that anger, from a secular worldview, is something to tame because it can either be adaptive or maladaptive, meaning healthy or unhealthy, but always morally neutral. Then last week we looked at a sample of what God’s Word says about anger. The Bible describes anger in vivid detail but does not necessarily define it outright. Using a definition of anger from biblical counseling professor Dr. Robert Jones, we discussed how anger is our whole-personed active response of negative moral judgment against a perceived evil. We broke down what this means, then spent most of our time examining God’s divine anger and righteous human anger as displayed perfectly through our example in Jesus Christ. We were challenged to ask ourselves three questions when examining our anger in order to guard against self-deception, thinking that our anger is righteous when in fact it is most often sinful.

Question one: Is my whole-person active response in response to actual sin? This requires looking at the situation from God’s point of view as revealed in His Word. What does God’s Word say about this situation? That’s an important worldview question because if it’s not sin, it’s personal preference, and responding to anger when we don’t get our way is sinful.

Question two: Is my whole-person active response focused on God and His kingdom, His rights, and His concerns, or is my response about me, my kingdom, my rights, my concerns? Who was trampled? Who was violated? Was it me, or was it the righteousness of God? Mind you, God doesn’t need you to defend Him, but we are certainly invited to be indignant when God is being robbed of glory, slandered in character, and mocked in purpose. Once again, if my anger is because I didn’t get my way, then it’s sinful.

Question three: Is my whole-person active response accompanied by other godly qualities and expressing itself in godly ways? Is the “righteousness” of my anger an excuse to respond in unrighteous ways, such as cursing, punching walls, disregarding or disrespecting my family. Or is my righteous anger accompanied by patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, and here’s a big one: self-control. If the fruit of the Spirit goes out the door when I demonstrate anger, then my anger is sinful.

The standards are high, on purpose, to protect us from becoming self-deceived into thinking our anger is righteous when in fact it’s sinful. Let’s be perfectly blunt: almost all of your anger is sinful.

Last week I shared that anger is something we do rather than something we have, and we do anger before our righteous, holy God. Anger is an incredibly versatile word. As a noun,

anger describes a state of being. As angry, we turn it into an adjective to describe a person or creature, or angrily to describe how someone did something. But in a biblical sense, for humans, when we talk about anger, we are talking about a response. Yes, it is possible to carry around anger, but it's still a response, a judgment we have made, but the biblical word for this anger is bitterness or resentment. We will talk about bitterness and resentment when we examine a biblical view of forgiveness in November, but for now we are talking about our immediate responses rather than the thing we are carrying around for an extended amount of time.

If anger is our whole-personed active response of negative moral judgment against perceived evil, then we will be able to examine the root of anger. Let's take a look at some passages to help us drill down to what's happening when we are angry.

Matthew 5:21-22

"You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.'²² But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment..."

Jesus unambiguously equates anger with murder because both are a judgment we make from the heart. In anger, our hearts grow hard and dismiss the God-given value of the other person, just like murder. Two chapters later Jesus continues:

Matthew 7:1-2

"Judge not, that you be not judged.² For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you."

Folks, anger is a judgment we make against perceived evil. Sometimes real evil, but it's still a judgment, and Jesus states clearly that judging in anger results in God's judgment. All of this begins in the heart before we even display behavior. So let's talk about the heart.

Luke 6:43-45

"No good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit,⁴⁴ for each tree is known by its own fruit. For figs are not gathered from thornbushes, nor are grapes picked from a bramble bush.⁴⁵ The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil, for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks."

Meaning, whatever is in the heart when it's bumped is what's going to come out because that's what it's filled with. If your heart is filled with judgmentalism, that's what will come out. If your heart is filled with "me first," that's what will come out.

How about this:

Mark 7:20-23

“What comes out of a person is what defiles him. ²¹ For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, ²² coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. ²³ All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.”

Notice how this list is both actions, attitudes, and thoughts. Whole person. All of what you think and do stems from your control center, the heart. So what is the “heart?” Well, Scripture uses this word most frequently to describe a person’s entire inner self, an all-encompassing term that includes thoughts, choices, affections, and emotions. Hebrews 4:12 gives us a helpful perspective.

Hebrews 4:12

For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

I had to seek higher wisdom because the words thoughts and intentions threw me for a loop. Some versions say thoughts and desires. Others say thoughts and attitudes. The Greek word “thoughts” in this verse is only used four times in the Bible, and the word “intentions” is used only twice. They are difficult terms because they are comprehensive. The author is making the case that Scripture discerns all of you that you keep hidden, all that you’re actually about, all that makes up the dynamic inner you. In other words, scripture discerns all of your dynamic heart. Now verse 13:

Hebrews 4:13

And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.

When Pastor Lloyd preached on this passage several months ago, he explained how naked means completely without covering, without excuse, and exposed is a wrestling term meaning you are pinned down and completely at the mercy of the other wrestler. God’s Word, when applied by the Holy Spirit to our receptive will, is God’s means whereby we examine and discern our hearts, which Luke 6 and Mark 7 make clear is the source of all sin, including sinful anger. No wonder Proverbs 4:23 admonishes us:

Proverbs 4:23

Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life.

Anger comes from the wellspring of your heart. So what does anger reveal about what is going on in my heart? Let’s throw this up onto our worldview diagram and diagnose our anger biblically.

Behavior – remember that the outermost layer of our personhood is behavior. Everyone, including toddlers, recognize anger when they see it and experience it. It’s so universal that

even in cultures where anger is suppressed you can still get people to describe anger. It begins with behavior. This includes our words, actions, and attitudes. What does anger look like? What does anger sound like? What attitude is demonstrated? Since anger is a response, what are we responding to?

Values – what do these words, actions, and attitudes reveal about my priorities, what I judge as just, right, and best? What does my behavior reveal about what I judge as unfair, wrong, or despicable? In other words, what judgment am I making? What am I responding to? We will never be held accountable for the people and circumstances outside our control, but how we respond is within our control and therefore our responsibility before God. Please remember that value statements are always judgment statements as we determine right and wrong, good, better, best, or bad, worse, and worst. Then we need to ask:

Beliefs – why do I believe my judgments are correct, and what does this judgment reveal about my beliefs concerning morality, fairness, and how I have anchored my life? The behavior is obvious, the values need some examination, but when we come to beliefs we need to stop and ask ourselves some rather fundamental questions, like, “Do I actually believe my anger is righteous? Even if I am responding to real evil, can I really justify my response? What does God think about my anger? Do I really believe in His promise to judge evil and make all things right? How do my values and behavior reflect these beliefs?” If there’s a discrepancy between what you cognitively believe as true and functionally believe as true, if what you declare in your mind and even mouth to be true but then deny with your actions, words, and attitudes, then it’s necessary to go deeper. Your beliefs may be biblically accurate and not need reorienting, but your motivations are faulty. These self-examination questions will lead us to poke at our worldview, at our motivations, at our hearts.

It's now time for a reality check. To whom am I accountable? Does what I do right now impact what happens in the future? Am I living for God’s glory or my own? Have I made it about me? Remember that God’s preeminent motivations for anything and everything He does is not your safety, your comfort, your health, your relationships, your satisfaction, your recognition. God’s first priority is His glory. God is not in the business of removing people and circumstances in your life that might “trigger” you. He’s in the business of redeeming your deceitful and desperately sick heart, and He will graciously and wisely use people and circumstances in your life to help reveal your heart and draw you into needing Him more.

If you stop worshiping God when your “rights” are violated, when confronted with the very real evil of others, when you don’t get what you judge as right, then it wasn’t really God you worshiped but rather what God does for you. What you’re actually saying, and this is super hard, is “I will center my life on God, provided He centers His life on me.” Let’s get as real as possible, folks. As real as it gets. Based on God’s Word and the definition we are using, what is the biblical view of being angry at God?

I wish I could claim to have never said this to someone who was struggling, but I have said the words, “It’s okay to be angry at God; He can take it. Go ahead and express your anger at Him.” Quite literally the most foolish thing I have ever said as a believer. Why?

Isaiah 45:9

“Woe [meaning God’s judgment will fall] to him who strives [who quarrels, who argues, who is angry!] with him who formed him, a pot among earthen pots! Does the clay say to him who forms it, ‘What are you making?’ or ‘Your work has no handles?’”

In other words, how foolish is it to point your finger up at God and say, “You don’t know what you are doing!”

When we direct our anger at God, we have judged Him. We are saying God is capable of sinning. What is really being said is, “God, you sinned against me! You wronged me, you violated my rights, and I’m angry at you because of x, y, or z!” You’ll argue, “But Ben, you showed us in Scripture how God is in sovereign control over evil, so I’m justified in my anger because He caused this!” In other words, “God triggered me, it’s not my fault.” In reality what you are saying is, “God, you violated my will,” rather than “thy kingdom come, thy will be done.”

When Job lost everything, all this wealth, all ten of his children, all his servants:

Job 1:20-22

Job arose and tore his robe and shaved his head and fell on the ground and worshiped.

²¹ And he said, “Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return. The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.” ²² In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrong.

In this initial grief, Job did not pass a negative moral judgment against God but rather submitted Himself to God’s will. Why? Because he trusted that God knows what He is doing. Anger at God, at best, is ignorance of God’s glory and sovereignty, and at worst is an attempt to rob God of His glory and sovereignty, which is why we hammered those themes so hard back in the Spring.

Perhaps this isn’t you. Perhaps you have never accused God of wrongdoing. Praise God! Don’t start now. But what about anger expressed on this horizontal plain. What does a biblical worldview reveal about this anger?

I’ve got bad news for you. It’s the same thing. Our sinful anger reveals how we are consumed with “my will be done” not “thy will be done” because it exposes our hearts, what we are truly worshiping. Let’s examine some biblical examples.

Esau was furious in Genesis 27 when he was refused his father’s blessing because Jacob tricked him out of it. Esau held a grudge against Jacob and even plotted his murder. His

ruling desire for his inheritance was more valuable than his brother's life, so he seethed with rage and sought revenge.

In Numbers 22 Balaam sets out on a journey to speak with King Balak, but his heart isn't in the right place and he's not listening to God's leading, so God's anger was kindled against Balaam. God sends the Angel of the Lord to block Balaam, who is riding his faithful donkey, and three times the donkey withdraws from the road because the Angel of the Lord was blocking her way. This angel was carrying a sword, by the way. Each time Balaam curses and beats his donkey, until the third time she finally lays down while he beats her with his staff.

Numbers 22:28-35

Then the Lord opened the mouth of the donkey, and she said to Balaam, "What have I done to you, that you have struck me these three times?" ²⁹ And Balaam said to the donkey, "Because you have made a fool of me. I wish I had a sword in my hand, for then I would kill you." ³⁰ And the donkey said to Balaam, "Am I not your donkey, on which you have ridden all your life long to this day? Is it my habit to treat you this way?" And he said, "No." ³¹ Then the Lord opened the eyes of Balaam, and he saw the angel of the Lord standing in the way, with his drawn sword in his hand. And he bowed down and fell on his face. ³² And the angel of the Lord said to him, "Why have you struck your donkey these three times? Behold, I have come out to oppose you because your way is perverse before me. ³³ The donkey saw me and turned aside before me these three times. If she had not turned aside from me, surely just now I would have killed you and let her live." ³⁴ Then Balaam said to the angel of the Lord, "I have sinned, for I did not know that you stood in the road against me. Now therefore, if it is evil in your sight, I will turn back." ³⁵ And the angel of the Lord said to Balaam, "Go with the men, but speak only the word that I tell you." So Balaam went on with the princes of Balak.

Balaam cursed and beat his donkey because she got in the way of his desires, his plans. He got bumped. Look what came out!

In 1 Samuel 20, King Saul's anger flared up against his own son because he wanted his son to be devoted to him rather than David, to the point he threw a spear at him! His own son!

King Herod ordered an abominable murder spree against Jewish baby boys because his desire to remain on the throne was more important than the tens of thousands of destroyed families under his rule.

In Acts 19, the silversmiths of Ephesus raged against the Apostle Paul because they loved money and he challenged their livelihood by turning people towards Christ instead of the idols they were making.

All of these biblical examples, and believe me there are hundreds more, reinforce what James 4 teaches us: anger arises when I don't get "my will be done." Our desire for evil

things, or our inordinate desires for even good things, underlie our anger, exposes the root of anger.

James 4:1-3

What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? ² You desire and do not have, so you murder [that means anger, folks. He's talking to Christians, so you're probably not out there ending lives in the flesh, but you're certainly doing it in spirit]. You covet [which is a fancy word for worship] and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel [I want what I want when I want it, and if you have it, I'm going to take it from you]. You do not have, because you do not ask. ³ You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.

It's time to make this practical. What should our response be towards not getting our way? What should our response be towards being sinned against, towards experiencing the significant effects of evil occurring in our world pretty much all the time?

A little over two weeks ago horrendous evil was perpetrated against a godly man with a godly message. I've been asked by numerous people how we as Christians ought to respond. Folks, this is going to be hard, but it will also be biblical.

Matthew 5:43-48

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' ⁴⁴ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵ so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. ⁴⁶ For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? ⁴⁷ And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? ⁴⁸ You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

It's impossible to judge someone when you are loving them. It's impossible to love them if your heart is set anywhere but Jesus. Too often our judgment is condemnation, meaning we have given up all hope that the gospel of Jesus Christ can redeem this person. You're essentially saying this person deserves hell. Oh, my friends, guard your heart against this thought because you are thinking in ignorance! We all deserve hell! If you truly realize the depth and extreme and permanence of hell, you would never wish it upon anyone! Rather, like Jesus, in your righteous anger you would grieve for their dead souls and pray for God's light of redemption to fall upon them. When you judge someone in anger, you are trespassing against God's rights!

Romans 12:14-21

¹⁴ Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. ¹⁵ Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. ¹⁶ Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight. ¹⁷ Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. ¹⁸ If possible, so far as it depends

on you, live peaceably with all. ¹⁹ Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” ²⁰ To the contrary, “if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.” ²¹ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

How, though? How do we respond this way? What needs to be inside my heart in order for this to be what overflows? It’s pretty simple, really. It’s a confession of my worldview, of the faith that defines my innermost being. It’s always been about faith. “God, I trust you with this. Even this. I trust you with this because you are sovereign. I trust you with this because you know what you’re doing. I trust you with this because it’s not about my glory, it’s about yours. I trust you with this because only you have the power to take evil and use it to make something good. Because I trust you with this, I’m going to pursue what is best and righteous. Because I trust you with this, I will response in a way that honors you, glorifies you, and demonstrated my unshackled faith in who you are.”

We practice this in difficult relationships. We practice this when the donkey won’t do what we want. We practice this when our boss is being unreasonable. We practice this when the stock market crashes. We practice this when saints are martyred. We grieve, yes. Jesus was grieved by the hardened hearts of the Pharisees. Righteous anger includes grieving over how trapped others are by sin. It includes grieving over our sin when we mess up. But putting off anger requires that we put on this kind of faith in the Creator Almighty God.

As we wrap up, let’s take a look at a commonly misused verse.

Ephesians 4:26

Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, ²⁷ and give no opportunity to the devil.

This verse is not granting permission to be angry. That doesn’t match the grammar, the context, or the biblical imperative five verses later:

Ephesians 4:31

Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice.

Verse 26 is saying, “I get it, you’re human, you’re going to get angry. But deal with it quickly because inviting that starving lion into your home will cause destruction!” The goal isn’t to see how much anger I can have before it becomes sinful. That’s really quite stupid, actually. The goal is to be rid of it as quickly as possible. To paraphrase, Paul is saying, “Anger is to be avoided at all costs, but if, for whatever reason, you do get angry, then refuse to indulge such anger so that you do not fall deeper into sin.” Folks, this means righteous human anger, because that anger can so quickly become sinful. Anger is a fire. We are not equipped to tame it, even when it’s “righteous.”

Equipping Hour: Sept. 28

Anger is a check engine light for the soul, for the heart. It reveals who and what we are worshiping. Don't ignore that blinking light. Examine your heart using God's Holy Word to see what needs to be transformed in you.

Questions

Book suggestion