

Sermon 17: Ephesians 4:26-27: Putting away anger

OUTLINE

Don't sin
Don't wait
Don't give opportunity

INTRODUCTION

Anger divides! Take one look at our culture today and notice how anger is drawing battle lines, polarizing and tribalizing groups against each other. We see the sides in the culture wars as the left are pitted against the right. Critical theory has divided society up into minority groupings who now interpret all activity towards them in terms of microaggressions. They play into a narrative of victimhood and oppression which must now be met with violent revolution. Cancel culture, trolling, and the mudslinging arena of social media are maelstroms of anger. This anger is nothing new, sinners have always been able to gladly and willingly fall into mob anger, prejudice, dissension and the willing destruction of others. What we see today is exacerbated by an educational tidal wave of leftist Neo-Marxist ideology, and media platforms who are sympathetic. The particular symptoms and issues may be different, but the root cause of sin causing anger is still the same. The same root of pride, self-righteousness, perceived slights, exaggerated responses, intimidation tactics, group think, newspeak, self-deceiving hearts, and a devil fanning the flame are always the same. Anger divides!

Paul has been addressing the matter of putting off our old ways. The first thing he did was address the matter of our speech talking about how we are to put away all lying and speak truth with one another. Now Paul addresses the matter of the heart as he deals with anger, Eph. 4:26-27, 'Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, ²⁷ and give no opportunity to the devil.' We will divide our look into these verses under three headings that follow the three negatives in the text, don't sin, don't wait, don't give opportunity.

Don't sin

'Be angry,' are the first words of our text. This is a strange saying, but Paul is quoting from Psalm 4:4-5 where David writes, 'Be angry, and do not sin; ponder in your own hearts on your beds, and be silent. *Selah*. Offer right sacrifices, and put your trust in the Lord.' Anger is not sinful in itself we have the capacity for anger from God because He has made us in His image. It is good and right to get angry at those things that God gets angry at. Because God is love He gets angry when others are hurt; because He is holy He gets angry at sin; because He is just He gets angry at injustice, whether it is committed by the rich or poor, black or white. True holiness includes righteous anger at sin and injustice and lies.

Now there is of course legitimate and illegitimate anger. Jesus as God in the flesh displayed legitimate anger at times. He did not get angry at personal losses, but He did get angry at the hypocrites and religious leaders for the burdens they placed on God's people. Jesus got angry when the court consecrated for Gentiles who had converted to pray was used as a market. Jesus got angry when God's glory was at stake or others were being deprived. This is the anger Paul is encouraging, anger that flows from godliness. In His case it is perfect, in our own case; even our righteous anger has the danger of derailing and

becoming something sinful. That is why Paul says, Eph. 4:26-27, 'Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, 27 and give no opportunity to the devil.'

Illegitimate anger comes from sinful passions. James 4:1-2, 'What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? ²You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask.' God gave us all our emotions to love others with, but when we invert things so that we are self-centred all our passions get riled up in service of ourselves. Think of pride for a moment and how it fuels anger. If someone thinks that your profound thoughts are wrong or insignificant; if someone has a poor opinion of you; if you lose face or are embarrassed; all of this ends in you being offended and angry. Oversensitivity is a form of pride. Mix pride with covetousness and you get a conceited competitiveness that envies another's fame and accomplishments. Unforgiveness is pride feeding on self-pity, for how dare that person hurt you. Why should you have to forgive for their actions against you are so serious; your pain is the most important to weigh. And on and on it goes. In order to put that self-centred anger to death we need the gospel.

How can you tell ungodly anger from godly, here is an answer from the Puritan William Perkins, 'If any here ask, how we may discern between godly anger, from that which is evil and unadvised, I answer two ways: first, by the beginning of it, for good anger proceeds from the love of him with whom we are angry. Now love is the fulfilling of the law, and therefore anger proceeding from love and guided thereby, cannot be a breach thereof, but evil anger proceeds from self-love, from dislike or hatred of the party with whom we are angry. Secondly, we may discern it by the end. Good anger is for God's glory against sin, because God thereby is dishonored, and for our brothers' good, but evil anger wants these ends, and intends private respects. It is quickly moved; it continues long; and also carries with it a desire of revenge.'¹

The gospel shines the light on our sinfulness, on our self-absorption. We are not God, our will is twisted and skewed, we are criminals who have forced our selfishness into every situation to the point of denying God as God in our lives. The gospel reveals us to be terminally and destructively selfish. It creates that necessary self-doubt that stops hiding our true and needy condition. When you think you are king you treat everyone's actions against you as high treason. The gospel reveals that we are the insurrectionists and we are the ones who deserve to die. We stop looking at others as those who violate our wills but others who are trapped in selfishness and can have mercy on them. We stop demanding our rights recognising that our lives are forfeit for all our past crimes. A new humility that distances itself from the self-interest that fuelled our anger in the past takes its place. And because God has loved His enemies and those who sinned against Him, we are now able to love likewise and not be driven by selfish anger.

Psalm 4:4-5 where Paul is quoting from also gives good advice. Picture it, David is fleeing with his men in tow, they are sitting around the campfire and they have murder on their minds, David is counselling himself and his men. His advice helps them not sin. He gives them four points of advice to avoid sin. Ponder in your hearts, ponder your own sins, ponder God's grace to you, ponder their condition in sin and need for God's intervention. Be silent! James 1:19-20, 'Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; ²⁰for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God.' We are slow to listen and quick to speak and be angry, David says, be silent, stop,

1 <https://purelypresbyterian.com/2018/11/26/anger-and-the-sixth-commandment/>

listen, think, don't just react. Thirdly, offer right sacrifices. Do what God wants you to do, to forgive, to reconcile, to as far as depends upon you be at peace with all men. Fourthly, trust in the Lord, this means don't take revenge, leave vengeance to God. Let Him be your defender and the one who settles the score.

Matthew Henry suggests that meekness, humility, is the virtue that we ought to cultivate as the bridle to anger: 'Meekness teaches us prudently to govern our own anger whenever any thing occurs that is provoking. As it is the work of temperance to moderate our natural appetites in things that are pleasing to sense, so it is the work of meekness to moderate our natural passions against those things that are displeasing to sense, and to guide and govern our resentments. Anger in the soul is like mettle (spirit) in a horse, good if it be well managed. Now meekness is the bridle, as wisdom is the hand that gives law to it, puts it into the right way, and keeps it in an even, steady, and regular pace; reducing it when it turns aside, preserving it in a due decorum, and restraining it and giving it check when at any time it grows headstrong and outrageous, and threatens mischief to ourselves or others. It must thus be held in, like the horse and mule, with bit and bridle, lest it break the hedge, run over those that stand in its way, or throw the rider himself headlong. It is true of anger, as we say of fire, that it is a good servant but a "bad master;" it is good on the hearth, but bad in the hangings (rafters). Meekness keeps it in its place, sets banks to this sea, and says, Hitherto thou shalt come, and no further; here shall thy proud waves be stayed.'² Gospel humility teaches us this meekness.

Be angry, but don't sin.

Don't wait

'Do not let the sun go down on your anger.' This is some of the best relationship advice the bible has to offer, and something that young couples no doubt have many memories trying to implement. Anger is a time bomb, anger is like gangrene, we cannot allow it to go unaddressed or it will grow and destroy. In fact Jesus Himself commands us to sort out our problems and reconcile. In Jesus teaching in Matt. 5:23-26 we can see this, 'So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, 24 leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. 25 Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison. 26 Truly, I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.' The key words which understand the structure of this text are the word 'brother' in v23-24 referring to righting our relationships with fellow believers. The second word is 'accuser' in v25-26 referring to our enemies.

The word so at the beginning of verse 23 indicates that Jesus is illustrating what a life devoid of anger and hatred looks like, and we will see it is a life that pursues peace. But we will also see that it does not only pursue peace with the easy, but makes the effort to make peace with all, friend and foe alike. There are two startling aspects to Jesus teaching. Firstly, please note that Jesus calls for you to make peace, not when you are the victim, but when someone has something against you. Now this does not only apply to those times when you are actually guilty, but when others unreasonably have something against you. You could be innocent or guilty, their problems with you could be real or perceived, that is not the point, you should be seeking a reconciliation. And here is the second shocking part, you should interrupt your worship in order to do so. We can assert that the person who has

² <https://ftc.co/resource-library/blog-entries/overcoming-anger-2/>

something wrong should be the one to take the initiative in making it right, but Jesus does not tell us whether the grievance is legitimate or perceived. The point is that if you come to know if someone has something against you, you should be a peacemaker. When Paul tells us to do all that we can to pursue peace I believe he is applying Jesus teaching here. No matter who started it are you going to make things better? Can you see the progression in Jesus thinking? You must not murder, you must not be angry, but not only should you remove all anger from your own heart towards your neighbour, you should seek to remove all the anger they may have in their hearts towards you. Unresolved conflicts are not an option for Jesus, and He calls upon us to reconcile. Innocent or guilty, married couples or Christian brethren, we must all seek for peace. We must all facilitate the loving of our neighbour which the sixth commandment implies. Each one of us should seek to be the first in peace proceedings.

Seeking the peace is a non-negotiable, but how should we go about doing it?

If you are the one who is seen to be in the wrong it is important to begin by searching your heart to see if any accusations are true. It is possible that there is truth in a criticism, even if it comes from a critical spirit. Own any sin which is yours, confess it to God, and go and correct any wrongs that you committed, even if it is the lesser of the sins in the situation. Own any and all sin that is real. Not only will this change the tone of the conversation but will open up possibilities for the other party to own their sins too. Before any confrontation, pray, ask God to search you, to soften hearts and to work for His glory in this conflict. Prayer is very important because we are all very good at stoking the fires of our own emotions with perceived wrongs and fantasised arguments in our heads. Consider carefully the words you will take with you. And remember that the devil is looking for an opportunity to divide the church, do not be his tool by holding onto pride, being quick with your tongue, slandering the brethren, etc. And if there is an restitution that must be made, make it. Never allow your hearts to become so hard that you go beyond being willing to humble yourself and get dirty in the deep emotions of these sorts of honest confrontations. I hope our conversation will be more than the polite and easy chit chat that characterises those only wading in shallow waters. We must be those who are committed to plumbing the depths of relating to one another in Christ.

What if someone has sinned against you, perceived or otherwise? If someone has offended you, make sure you go to that person and sort it out. Do not begin to broadcast their sin and do nothing to making the relationship right, that is the sin of gossip and a disobeying of Jesus command to seek the peace. You may want to talk to someone you can trust who will keep a confidence to make sure you are not imagining things or being oversensitive. Here are a few rules for confronting someone that Paul David Tripp mentions in his book, war of words.

Firstly, remember that confrontation is not an opportunity for venting emotion, but the purpose of confrontation is to draw someone closer to God and holiness, not over your knee in punishment.

Second, make sure you have done sufficient data gathering before confronting. It may be that things are not as they appear to you, check your facts, and make sure things are as you think they are and need addressing.

Third, in any confrontation remember that you cannot read minds and so you should resist attributing bad motives to actions, this tone of accusation will only pollute the tone of the discussion and could be wildly off the mark.

Fourth, refrain from inflammatory and emotional language. Confrontations are fraught with enough emotion that strong language will only add to the fire and clog the discussion.

Fifth, in any confrontation remember that you have a common enemy in sin and not in the other person. Sin is the problem we want to battle together, not each other.

Sixth, using scripture in confrontation is important, but remember that scripture is to be used as a mirror to reveal our sins for addressing not a club for threatening judgement. Seventh, confrontation is not for the purpose of doing what you want but what God wants. It is not a self-help therapy where we offload, get things off of our chest, or clear our minds; it is not about us but God.

Eighth, build relationship with anyone you want to confront so that your words are the wounds of a friend not a stranger.

Ninth, it is only impatience that demands instant and universal change instead of seeing the Spirit as enabling real but slow change.

Don't give opportunity

Where the brethren dwell together in unity, there the Lord commands a blessing, Ps. 133. But where there is disunity, anger, accusation, slander, this is the devil's playground. That is why Paul adds, 'and give no opportunity to the devil.' The devil's activity as the antichrist is antigospel. The gospel pays for sin and soothes the conscience, the devil accuses of sin and stirs up the conscience. The gospel unites sinners as they who are unworthy forgive others who are unworthy, the devil blinds us to our own unworthiness and amplifies the unworthiness of others stirring us up into rabid angry hate and division. The gospel covers over sin and condemnation the antigospel exposes sins and re-imposes condemnation. All this exposure of sin and past hurts against one another opens old wounds, it does not allow them to heal, it stirs up the emotions to a faux righteous anger. The trouble with our heart as sinners is that we can emotionally react to falsehoods and lies. Our emotions are not judges they follow what our minds believe. And if we allow anger to take root..., all we have to do is look at the history of humanity from the first murder and see the endless potential for destruction that can result. Anger is the seed of murder and so many other sins we commit against each other, where we take our capacity for judging sin and turn it upon our fellow man.

The cure for anger is the gospel, this is where Paul points the Ephesians in Eph. 4:32-5:2, 'Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you. ³Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. ²And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.' This is his conclusion that is coming after Paul encourages the Ephesians to be kind and to put away all those sins that harm their relationships. This is the cure that we apply in our dealings with each other, and the only thing that will work to settle the felt injustices that are presently dominating the public arena today.