

Ephesians 4:17-5:2

¹⁷ So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking. ¹⁸ They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts. ¹⁹ Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, and they are full of greed.

²⁰ That, however, is not the way of life you learned ²¹ when you heard about Christ and were taught in him in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus. ²² You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; ²³ to be made new in the attitude of your minds; ²⁴ and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.

²⁵ Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to your neighbor, for we are all

members of one body. ²⁶ “In your anger do not sin”: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, ²⁷ and do not give the devil a foothold. ²⁸ Anyone who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with their own hands, that they may have something to share with those in need.

²⁹ Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. ³⁰ And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. ³¹ Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. ³² Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. **5:1** Follow God’s example, therefore, as dearly loved children ² and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

Anger as a Gift, Pt. 1

In my weekly sermon writing process, I begin most weeks by looking at the appointed scriptures for the upcoming Sunday, and half of the task is just discerning what to preach on. With four different passages, each containing numerous revelations about God and us, it feels like there’s the potential for an infinite number of sermons contained in those words. So, I of course pray and ask the Lord to show me what He has for me to say, though there are all sorts of ways He can provide that direction.

Well, this past Monday, I took time with these scriptures, but by the end of the day I still wasn’t sure what the Lord wanted me to preach on. But then on Tuesday morning, I was trying to make some changes to my cell phone provider that I’d planned to make and what should’ve been a pretty simple, maybe 15 minute process, turned into an absolute debacle. I will spare you the details, but I spent more than five hours either on the phone or live chatting with technical support at Cricket Wireless and Mint Mobile, and they were each telling me that the other company needed to fix it on their end. And for some of that it wasn’t even clear I’d be able to get my phone number back, which woulda been a whole nother thing. And it was at some point during that blessed day that I realized that today I would be preaching on verse 26 of today’s passage from Ephesians 4, which reads: ²⁶ “In your anger do not sin...” I realized that having to write a sermon on anger is something that could really benefit me this week, and I imagined that perhaps I’m not the only one here who can feel challenged about what to do with anger when it arises.

So, Ephesians 4 says at verse 26, “In your anger do not sin”: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, ²⁷ and do not give the devil a foothold.” But throughout the passage as a whole, Paul is calling the Church in Ephesus - *and us* - to throw off *all sorts of* sinful behaviors, or really allow the Lord to take away from us.

- In verse 19, he calls us out of sensuality - that is, indulging sexual lust - and also out of greed.
- Down in verse 25 he calls us to give up speaking falsehoods
- Then out of stealing in verse 28

- Unwholesome talk in verse 29
- And then down in verse 31 he circles back to some sins in the anger category, calling us to “get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice.”

And ‘anger’ in verse 31 refers to carrying anger around or embracing anger, because just the emotion of anger, the feeling that arises in us when somebody does something we don't want them to do or prevents us from doing something we want to do - this emotion or feeling of anger is not itself sin. Rather, it is what we *do with* that feeling - how we respond to it - that can easily devolve into sin, harming us and others. So, this leads me to the good news I want to share with you today: that God wants to teach us how to receive our anger as a gift, but to respond to it in the way of love and not cause harm; God wants to teach us how to be faithful to Paul’s command in verse 26, “In your anger do not sin,” how to “Be angry, but do not sin.”

Well, in addition to the way verse 26 distinguishes between being angry and sinning, another reason we can know that having the mere *of anger* is not a sin, is because we see Jesus angry on multiple occasions in the gospels; and more than just when He turns over tables in the temple: that was not just a one-off. And this not only confirms that merely feeling anger is not sin, but that in some instances even responding in anger can be righteous.

And yet, there are clearly other responses to anger that are absolutely harmful to us & others, that God wants to teach us to avoid. The rest of Ephesians 4:26 warns against “letting the sun go down” on our anger, which indicates holding a resentment or living in unforgiveness and gives “the devil a foothold” that can wreck our hearts in all sorts of ways. And Jesus’ teaching from Matthew 5¹ warns against receiving those or indulging feelings of anger in such a way that produces contempt toward another.

How do you tend to respond when anger arises in you? Well, the good news is that God wants to teach us how to receive our anger as a gift, but to respond to it in the way of love and not cause harm. Ben Sterkne of Gravity Commons observes² that when anger arises in us

- Some people often respond by *trying to not* to be angry - by fighting the feeling; some Christians have been led to believe this must be their response because they’ve been led to believe that just the *feeling* of anger is sin.³
- Others may be inclined to go the other direction and feed their anger, stewing on it or indulging it because it makes them feel righteous or authentic & alive.
- And still others may just try to ignore the bad feeling and distract themselves with work or pleasure.

But Jesus never responded to his anger in any of these ways, so we know that there must be a better way for us as well. And Sterkne is correct when he identifies that that *better way* is to face our feeling of anger when it arises and bring it to Jesus for discernment and healing.

The way we can begin to face our anger is by naming it before the Lord or a fellow believer, by not trying to handle our anger alone. And perhaps we can begin to feel safe to face our anger when we understand that the emotion of anger is **a gift**, that is part of the way God made us, because it alerts us that something is wrong in a situation or within us. But if we want to respond to our anger in the way of love and not cause harm, it is *incumbent upon us* to identify the cause of our anger in a given situation in order to then discern what to do about it. So, our posture in talking to God or another believer about our anger should be “What does God want me to know and/or what is really going on for me that is causing

¹ Matthew 5:21-24 - (Jesus said,) ²¹ “You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ ²² But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, ‘Raca,’ is answerable to the court. And anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell. ²³ “Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, ²⁴ leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift.”

² Ben Sterkne, “What to Do With Negative Emotions In Discipleship,” <https://gravitycommons.com/negative-emotions-discipleship/>

³ Typically based on sloppy teaching on Ephesians 4 and Matthew 5.

me to be angry?” And once we understand the cause, this will inform how we can respond in a way that does not harm. So let’s talk about what we might find when we dig into the cause of our anger in a particular situation.

One common cause for us to feel angry is when we aren’t getting our way. Anyone here ever get mad when you’re trying to get someone to do something, but they refuse, or there’s something you don’t want a person or group of people to do, but they do it anyway? Well, when we’re angry from not getting our way, we first need to discern whether this desire we have for our way is from a place of love or from our sin. And asking the Lord or a wise believer for their perspective can help us discern *this*.

Can you think of a time you’ve gotten angry about not getting your way when it is from a loving place? Let’s say we’re angry because we want someone we love to follow God or to not persist in a destructive behavior because we love them and we want what is best for their life, but we don’t get our way. Well, when we discern that what we want someone to do or not do is from a loving place and not selfishness, we can look to how Jesus handled that, because we know there were certainly occasions during Jesus’ ministry when people weren’t doing what He wanted them to do and we know His desire for people is always from a place of love, because He’s God.

Well, when Jesus didn’t get His way, we never see Him resort to rage or nagging people to coerce them to do what He wanted. Instead, we see Jesus *call people toward* doing what He thought was best - it was always clear what Jesus was calling people to do, usually follow Him - but He would never control outcomes. And there are indications that when the outcome wasn’t what He wanted, He had either prepared for it - sorta pre-grieved it - *or* He would **lament**. For example, we get a glimpse of Jesus verbalizing a lament when he was rejected by the leaders in Jerusalem and said, “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing” (Mt 23:37). So, when we discern that we are angry because we aren’t getting our way with a loving desire for someone *or some situation*, we can make that desire known if it’s not known already (to the person or if its a situation, to God), but then we can dissipate that anger healthily not by stuffing it or indulging it, but by lamenting our disappointment to God or another believer. **The good news is that God wants to teach us how to receive our anger as a gift, but to respond to it in the way of love and not cause harm.**

But what about when we find ourselves angry at not getting our way, when we discern our way is really from a selfish oa

But if we realize all of this - our selfishness - a little late, which happens to me ... more often than I’d like to admit (“Oh, I’m actually the jerk here”), and we had already begun sinfully mistreating the person who won’t give us our way (in our anger) - or to a random person that has nothing to do with the situation because they’re just *there*: you know, when something triggers us at home, but we take it out on somebody at work or by being rude to the waitress - when we’ve already gone beyond feeling our anger and into reacting sinfully, we can confess that Lord, receive His grace, and apologize to the person, and where necessary make amends. **The good news is that God wants to teach us how to receive our anger as a gift, but to respond to it in the way of love and not cause (lasting) harm.**

But the final cause of anger I want to cover today is when someone does hurt or wrong us. When someone speaks words that hurt us or takes an action that betrays us, perhaps it's a loved one, a friend or a coworker, whoever, the principle of what Jesus taught in Matthew 18:15⁴ is that if they are a safe

⁴ Matthew 18:15-17,21-22 - (Jesus said,) ¹⁵ “If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over. ¹⁶ But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that ‘every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.’ ¹⁷ If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church; and if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector...”

²¹ Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?” ²² Jesus answered, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.

enough person, we should go and tell them their fault. If they don't know how they've hurt us, how can we expect them to stop or that they won't do it again? Now, in this passage it's not until verses 21 & 22 that Jesus insists we must forgive, but in my experience if we can forgive someone *before* going to tell them how they've hurt us, that interaction usually goes *much better*, because we'll be more capable of explaining our hurt graciously and not being tempted to retaliate in the way or the tone that we explain it.

But I need to be really clear here about what forgiveness is NOT. Forgiveness does not mean we don't press charges if someone does something illegal against us. And forgiveness does not mean we forget what someone has done and act like it never happened ["forgive and forget is not in the Bible!"]. Forgiveness simply means that we are giving up the right to personally retaliate against the person for what they've done wrong.⁵

But forgiveness is not the same as reconciliation. And these two are often confused. We can forgive someone without ever talking to them. Heck, we can forgive someone who's already dead; and some of us surely need to! So, forgiveness does not require anything of the offender. But when we've been hurt by someone, in order for us to move toward reconciliation, the offender needs to be made aware that we've been hurt and they need to take responsibility for the wrong they've done before we can move toward rebuilding trust and full reconciliation, toward restored relationship. But if they won't acknowledge their sin, and if another wise believer agrees they were in the wrong, then verse 17 says we are to "treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector," which translated to today means we should have a boundary against resuming close relationship so long as their unrepentant person. *We still have to forgive them*, and not retaliate against them and escalate things, but reconciliation is not appropriate until they take responsibility and trust is re-earned. And you may wonder, "Well, how close *is too close* of a level to resume the relationship with the unrepentant person?" When it's close enough for them to do it again. And if it becomes clear that restored relationship isn't going to happen or can't happen, then we'll need to be intentional to grieve that loss (with the Lord). ##

So these are the three most common causes for us to get angry, at least in our interpersonal relationships. But they're not the *only* reasons anger may arise in us. Still to cover next week is how we can be provoked to anger when someone uses their power to exploit or victimize someone with less power in a situation, and how Jesus empowers us to respond to that; as well as how we can respond in love when we are the one is victimized or exploited!

But for now, I want to invite us to consider what the Spirit could be saying to each of us about what's been laid out today? Perhaps you're carrying anger about something right now; perhaps even with someone in this room! Or perhaps you recognize that your reflexive response when anger arises is to suppress the feeling, or maybe you're more inclined to embrace it unreflectively, or maybe just ignore it and pretend it's not happening. But Jesus invites us to face our anger - to treat it as a gift that's trying to tell us something - but to face it with Him, whether in prayer or consulting with a wise believer. And to follow His lead to respond in the way of love instead of harm.

In the Name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

⁵ One is magnanimous who has the ability to be forgiving and loving toward their rivals or enemies. And given that as humans we all have the capacity for anger, such magnanimity will come only as anger becomes our servant rather than our master.