

Wisdom in Relationships *Slow To Anger*

Last Sunday, Pastor Chris introduced a new message series titled *Wisdom in Relationships*. The essence of life is relationships. It is a theme from the first book of the Bible, Genesis, all the way to the last book, Revelation.

It starts with this: God is a relational being, existing and relating within the godhead as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. He created man for relationship – with his Creator, with a spouse as God provided, with others who would form the human family. In the beginning, there was perfect harmony in relationships. But when sin entered into the world, relationships were fractured. And the rest, as they say, is history.

Turn in your Bible to the New Testament book of James. This letter, by the pen of James the half-brother of Jesus, was written early in the history of the Christian church, probably in the mid AD 40's. It is intensely practical. James doesn't develop a lot of theological issues; it is book filled with practical, ethical exhortations. In fact, within the 108 verses, there are 54 imperatives or commands.

“James” is a call to true community among believers and what is required if genuine, sincere relationships are to grow and thrive. And so, the text that forms the basis of this message series comes from chapter one, verse 19:

James 1:19

“Quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger” – that's a recipe for good relationships. We're going to reverse the order for our series and begin with “slow to anger.” I do that intentionally because I think that one of those things that contributes to corrosive relationships is anger. And anger often comes out in angry words. And we speak caustically rather than listen perceptively.

Anger is a powerful emotion. How many of you have ever been angry? Those who didn't raise their hands are probably either asleep or in denial!

Some of you perhaps came in this morning angry. As you think of someone or something or some circumstance, the emotion you feel is anger.

Anger, as an emotion, occurs frequently in the Scriptures. It is often used in conjunction with or equivalent to “wrath.” You might be surprised to learn that the person most often described as “angry” in the Bible is God. Over 135 times in Scripture, there is reference to God’s anger plus dozens of references to his wrath. Here’s a couple of examples:

And the people complained in the hearing of the LORD about their misfortunes, and when the LORD heard it, his anger was kindled.... – *Numbers 11:1*

Who considers the power of your anger, and your wrath according to the fear of you? – *Psalms 90:11*

I think, in general, Christians have a difficult time with the concept of God’s wrath and anger – probably for two reasons. First, we see it through our own selfish exercise – that is, according to our own anger and wrath. Second, we have a one-sided view of God, which is a sentimental view of God as love, meaning that is the only emotion he experiences and the only attribute he possesses. We fail to see his justice, his holiness, his righteousness.

Let’s look at an incident in Jesus’ earthly life that is very instructive. Turn back towards the beginning of your New Testament to the Gospel of Mark, chapter 3.

Mark 3:1-5

God has anger. Jesus has anger. The task of the Christian is not to avoid all anger, but to have appropriate anger in a godly way. It is helpful for us to see what God’s anger is like, and from that, how we deal with ours.

God’s Anger: Four things to note about God’s anger:

1) Focused anger – that is, it is situation specific. It is a response to specific situations, specific offenses. God’s anger is not indiscriminate. It is also not accidental. Paul makes this statement in his letter of Ephesians:

Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. – *Ephesians 5:6*

Right before this verse, Paul exhorts his readers to avoid immorality, impurity, greed, idolatry and coveting. God's wrath comes because of these specific offenses.

God announces that he is angry, why he is angry, and what he will do about it. He is neither angry in general – an angry disposition, nor does a trivial act set him off. Some people get angry (situational/occasional); some people are angry (habitual/continual).

God does not displace his anger like we so often do. His anger is always directed towards the real cause, the real source. Too often for us, something happens at work or at school; we come home and take it out on others – displaced anger.

2) Controlled anger – God's anger does not become uncontrollable rage or malice. His anger always has boundaries.

When people think of anger, it is often an out-of-control anger or deep, residing resentment. God's anger is controlled anger. Let me ask you a question: do you control your anger or does your anger control you? The writer of Proverbs puts it well:

Whoever is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and he who rules his spirit than he who takes a city. – *Proverbs 16:32*

3) Restrained anger – God's anger is slow to develop, slow to be expressed. David writes in Psalm 103:

The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. He will not always chide, nor will he keep his anger forever. – *Psalm 103:8-9*

Being slow to anger is a mark of maturity. Stuffing and denying is an entirely different thing than this. And finally,

4) Replaced anger – God's anger is eventually replaced by kindness and compassion. The prophet Micah asks,

Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over transgression for the remnant of his inheritance? He does not retain his anger forever, because he

delights in steadfast love. He will again have compassion on us; he will tread our iniquities underfoot. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea.

– *Micah 7:18-19*

God is not stuck in his anger. It has its time, place and expression. Then, when its work is done, relationship is restored.

We, as Christians, are called, not to deny our emotions, but to manage them under the power of the Holy Spirit and by the grace of God. There are two extremes to avoid, both wrong, both dangerous – emotionally, psychologically, physically and spiritually:

- Repress, deny, stuff
- Full-bore venting, unloading, indiscriminate, unbounded, undirected salvos of anger

Part of this is getting in touch with your anger. If you are an angry person, it means trying to come to grips with why you are that way – what has shaped you and fed this emotion. In many cases, it has come from growing up in an environment where it was not safe, where you were not encouraged to express yourself appropriately. This calls for growth in understanding yourself, particularly in relation to anger.

The Apostle Paul gives us a biblical framework for dealing with anger in his letter of Ephesians, chapter four.

A Biblical Framework for Anger:

Before we look at these verses specifically, let's consider their setting within the larger context of the book of Ephesians and the immediate context of the chapter. Paul spends the first three chapters talking about our relationship with Christ – our position in Christ, our standing in grace because of the work of Christ, the mystery of the Gospel – a gospel that encompasses both Jew and Gentile. There are also two absolutely fabulous prayers of Paul included in these chapters.

When he comes to chapter four, Paul shifts gears. He moves from doctrine to practice, from our position in Christ to our condition in Christ, from making great declarations of truth about who we are in Christ to very practical exhortations on how we are to walk in Christ. The focus of these last three chapters is all on

relationships – relationships with others in the church, relationships within families, and relationships in the marketplace.

Here's how chapter four sets up:

- Verses 1-16: Because of what God has done for you – Therefore:
 - 1) Walk in a worthy manner
 - 2) Grow up in Christ

These appeals are given in the context of the unity of the church. Paul puts all of our obligations to other believers in the context of the unity God has established. The greatest demonstration of the grace of God to the world is the way that believers relate to each other.

- Verses 17-24: Because of what God in Christ is doing in you – Therefore:
 - 1) Do not walk how you used to walk
 - 2) Put off the old man, the old self; put on the new self, being renewed in your mind

Paul speaks of the conscious choice to operate in the sphere of the new self – who you are in Christ, rather than the old, with all the baggage of our self – our old nature which is bent towards sin and selfishness.

- Verses 25-32: Because of your new self, created in righteousness and holiness of the truth, “therefore,” Paul says, “I want you to do, to practice these things.” Those things are:
 - Speak truth (vs. 25)
 - Control anger – we’ll come back to this in a moment
 - Work (vs. 28)
 - Control your tongue (vs. 29) – we’ll be talking about this next week
 - Put away: bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, slander and malice

Paul switches gears at this point; he moves out of reverse into drive. Verse 31 is the negative; verse 32 is the positive. The kind of behavior a Christian should have in relation to others is expressed in three thoughts:

- Be kind
- Be tender-hearted
- Be forgiving

Now, let's go back to verse 26 – **Ephesians 4:26**

In verse 26, we have a green light, a flashing yellow light, and a glaring red light.

Green Light: “Be angry”

“Angry” is a form of the Greek word *orgē*. It is a strong word of passion, the very same word used to describe God's anger.

There are things we should be angry about – wrongs, injustices, disregard for God and the things of God, unrighteousness and wickedness that pervades our world. The list goes on.

But the fact is, most of our anger becomes sin or leads to sin. It is most often directed at the wrong target for the wrong reason and seldom kept under control. I would guess that most of our anger is motivated, at its deepest level, from selfishness or self-centeredness.

Yellow Light: “Do not sin”

This cautions us against anger that becomes sin. We sometimes have a right response about something, expressed by anger, but then self gets involved: my feelings, my pride, my rights, my sense of justice. And we sin in further expression of that anger.

Many Christians have been taught that all anger is wrong; it is bad; it is a sin. Yet, Paul seems to make a distinction here between the anger and the expression of it. Anger must be channeled appropriately so that we do not sin ourselves.

Red Light: “Do not let the sun go down on your anger”

Paul uses a different word for “anger” here. It means literally “provocation.” It speaks of anger mingled with irritation, exasperation and embitterment. It is the personal resentment that righteous anger can become when harbored and brooded over, often leading to malice and bitterness.

Perhaps we can illustrate this with those who are righteous in anger concerning abortion, but who then sin because their anger leads to bitterness and provocation, and they bomb abortion clinics or shoot abortion doctors. Do you see the application of Paul's teaching here?

Or perhaps it is a parent who is justifiably angry at a child's actions, but then abuses them in that anger. Surely that is not just.

Be angry, but don't let it hang around lest you become ensnared by it. Then Paul adds a fascinating comment – **Ephesians 4:27**.

There are several areas mentioned in Scripture in which the devil seems to take advantage and exploit open opportunities. One of these is anger.

Do you remember the story of Cain? God accepted the sacrifice of Abel, Cain's brother, but not that from Cain. We read in Genesis, chapter four:

So Cain was very angry, and his face fell. The LORD said to Cain, "Why are you angry, and why has your face fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is for you, but you must rule over it." – *Genesis 4:5-7*

Cain could not or would not. So he rose up and killed his brother.

In Ephesians four, Paul seems to be cautioning us about wrong anger, misplaced anger, misdirected anger, out-of-control anger, anger without biblical boundaries. William Barclay writes:

The anger which is selfish, passionate, undisciplined, uncontrolled is a sinful, a useless and a hurtful thing, which must be banished from the Christian life. But the anger which is disciplined into the service of Christ and of our fellow man, and which is utterly pure and utterly selfless, is one of the great dynamic forces in this world.

May I move on to some practical advice regarding anger? There are many aspects of dealing with anger.

- **Seek to identify the real emotion (if other than genuine anger).** I think most men, in particular, respond to other emotions in anger rather than expressing the actual emotion instead. Disappointment, fear, sadness, confusion are often the real emotion, but we find it difficult to admit, “I’m afraid;” “I am sad,” etc. It comes out as anger.
- **Honesty – admit it.** Face the problem squarely. Avoid rationalization. So often it feels good to be angry; it gives you something to do.
- **Express your anger when appropriate.** Do it constructively, not destructively. This is something we need to teach our children. It’s not okay to punch your brother or sister in the face. It would be better to kick a hole in the drywall. I’ve had to repair drywall from each of my three boys. That’s better than beating on your brother. But you want to help them progress from the negative to a more positive response.

Ross Campbell, in his book *How To Really Love Your Child*, uses an “Anger Ladder” to demonstrate helping our kids learn to express anger in a more positive way. If you are the parent of a younger child, I commend to you two books that Ross has written: *How To Really Love Your Child* and *How To Really Love Your Angry Child*.

- **Learn to talk with your spouse or a good friend on the level of your feelings.** This is very difficult for most men. Men tend to answer the question: “What do you feel?” with “What do I think.”
- **Stay in control.** One of my greatest disappointments as a father is the way my anger at times was expressed towards my boys. How many times I had to ask for their forgiveness. Children do not know how to handle parental anger. Ross Campbell was very helpful in my understanding that. Proverbs 29:11 says,

A fool gives full vent to his spirit, but a wise man quietly holds it back.
– *Proverbs 29:11*

Great advice. Wisdom in relationships involves self-control.

- **Be willing to overlook offenses.** Here’s the wisdom of Proverbs:

Good sense makes one slow to anger, and it is his glory to overlook an offense.
– *Proverbs 19:11*

So many things we act angrily towards were never intended as offense. Some people are super-sensitive: thin-skinned and thick-hearted instead of thin-hearted and thick-skinned.

- **Return good for evil.** The Apostle Paul exhorts us to leave vengeance to God. Then he says,

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.”
Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. – *Romans 12:20-21*

- **Grow in Christ.** As we grow spiritually and we allow the Holy Spirit to develop in us the character of Christ, we will exhibit the fruit of the Spirit which includes patience, kindness, gentleness and self-control.

As I close, let me give you some advice on dealing with an angry person.

- **Give room to vent appropriately.** Encourage constructive resolution. Aim at resolution, not just venting. Venting won't accomplish much other than perhaps letting the person feel better. George Sweeting says, “A student said to me, ‘I lose my temper, but it's all over in a minute.’ I answered, ‘And so is the hydrogen bomb. But think of the damage it produces.’”
- **Encourage “directed anger”** – focus on the real cause of the anger.
- **Do not respond in anger.** Proverbs 15:1 says –

A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger. – *Proverbs 15:1*

- **Avoid people with an angry disposition.** Again the Proverbs provides wisdom for relationships:

Make no friendship with a man given to anger, nor go with a wrathful man, lest you learn his ways and entangle yourself in a snare. – *Proverbs 22:24-25*

“Be slow to anger.” “Be angry and do not sin.” Wisdom for healthy relationships.

Message – Sunday, June 8, 2014
Rev. Mark Petersburg, Senior Pastor
Knollwood Community Church – Burke, VA

So often, anger is expressed in angry words. That will be our focus next week as we continue to consider wisdom for relationships from James – “slow to anger, slow to speak, quick to hear.”