

Jesus and Anger

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Introduction.

One of the things that we continually struggle with as Christians is the problem of calibrating our moral standards. Whether we realize it or not, we are constantly being influenced by the world, constantly being pulled toward sharing the world's point of view. Part of what makes this so seductive is the way we look when we see ourselves through the world's eyes. By worldly standards, just about all of us are pretty good to very good people, and as long as we don't commit crimes or cheat on our spouses, we'll stay on that level. As a result, there's no incentive to improve.

Of course, when we begin to compare ourselves to the standard of the word, all of that changes. Not one of us is righteous according to Jesus' point of view, and we all have so much to improve to get there. One of the problems in our lives that the word pinpoints that the world doesn't is anger. According to the people around us, as long as anger doesn't move us to commit physical violence, it's OK. As a young man I was studying with a few weeks ago told me, "You're entitled to your anger." Jesus, though, calls us to a higher standard of righteousness with respect to anger. Consider His words in Matthew 5:21-26. According to our Lord, anger on our own account is just as sinful and problematic as murder.

For just about all of us, this means that we have work to do. Most of us don't struggle with the temptation to murder our fellow man, but just about all of us wrestle with our anger. I don't consider myself a particularly short-tempered man, but I still get angry with my wife, or my family, or my friends far more often than I should, and that leads me to say and do all sorts of other ungodly things. I doubt I'm alone in that, either. Anger is a consistent problem in our lives, and if we want to be true disciples, we must learn to control it. Let's look this evening, then, at Jesus and anger.

The Law and Jesus.

Let's begin our examination of this topic in the same place that Jesus does, with a study of what he tells the Jews, **"YOU HAVE HEARD"**. This comment appears in Matthew 5:21. There are two interesting points in here that we need to look at. First of all, although Jesus here is accurately citing the Ten Commandments, he tells the people that this is something they had heard. In other words, although the people had been given the Law by God, they were not studying the Law for themselves. Instead, they'd just been accepting whatever the Pharisees told them and going from there. Sadly, the Pharisees proved untrustworthy and led the Jews away from God. This is not an isolated circumstance. Any time any religious group trusts their leaders to tell them what God says, those leaders always end up leading them astray. That goes for us too. We need to base our faith not on what we hear, but on what we read.

Also, the difference between what the Law says and what Jesus says leads some people to ask, "If God never changes, how come there's such a contrast between the two covenants?" The answer to that is that God never intended the Law to be permanent. From the very beginning, He intended it as a stopgap, a way to elevate His people morally to the point where they could appreciate the law of Christ. We see why this was necessary in passages like Proverbs 1:10-12. Sometimes, we forget how lawless the times of the Bible, especially the Old Testament, were. This proverb appears for a reason, and the reason is that young men who weren't interested in farming commonly took up with gangs of robbers and lived off of murder and pillage. In a setting like that, the idea that people shouldn't be angry is laughable. When you have gangs of lawless thugs roaming the countryside, they need to be taught not to murder first. That's why God started with controlling behavior, and then, once relative peace appeared, moved on to controlling emotions.

We see the emotional control that Jesus wants to impose in the section beginning with **"I SAY"**. This portion of the text appears in Matthew 5:22. To understand what's going on here, we need to grasp the connection back to vs. 21. When Jesus says that the man who is angry without a cause is liable to the judgment, He's referring back to the judgment of murderers under the Law of Moses. In other words, just as harshly as murder was dealt with under the old covenant, that's the way that ungodly anger is going to be dealt with under the new covenant. It only gets worse from there. He continues on to tell the Jews that if they call someone "Raca," which means "empty-headed or blockheaded", they would be liable to the council, that is, the Sanhedrin, the highest judicial body of the land, which addressed only the most serious crimes. Finally, anyone who says to another "you fool" is worthy of condemnation to hell.

This strikes us as particularly harsh, especially since just about all of us have ignored this warning at one point or another. The point here is not that there's anything extra-special bad about the specific word "fool". The point is that whenever we condemn another from a heart filled with anger and contempt, we're doing something that God hates. It's just as bad to get mad at our kid and tell him he's stupid, or to blast an employee or an underling and accuse him of being worthless. All of those amount to the same thing, and when we let such an expression slip our lips, we're in danger.

Of course, there's also a weasel clause in this verse that we need to address. The weasel clause appears, at least in this translation, with the words "without cause". If our hearts are inclined to do evil, we might read this and say to

ourselves, “I have every right to be angry with him. He did this stupid thing and I ought to call him stupid.” That kind of argument might have scored points with the Pharisees, but it’s not going to make any headway with God. Look at James 1:19-20. I know I preach on this verse a lot, but I do it because we all need to remember it, and I, at least, don’t remember it as well as I should. Every time we’re angry at someone, our first thought needs to be to ask WHY we’re angry. Are we angry on God’s account, because this person has broken the divine law? Or are we angry on our own account, because this person has done something that has offended us? Those are two totally different situations. In the first, our anger should move us to lovingly approach the sinner and encourage him to repent. In the second situation, we need to clamp down on our anger, precisely because it DOESN’T approach the righteousness of God. It’s that kind of anger, the causeless anger that’s based on us and our opinions, that Jesus is warning us about. If we allow this anger outside of God’s law to control us, it will do tremendous harm to us both in this life and in the life to come.

Consequences of Anger.

We see one of the dangerous consequences of anger discussed in Jesus’ comments on **ANGER AND WORSHIP**. We find these comments in Matthew 5:23-24. Much of the time, we make a terrible mistake in reading this section, when we act like vs. 23 begins an entirely new thought, and we sever it from Jesus’ words in vs. 21-22. That’s a poor reading of the text. Notice that in this particular translation, vs. 23 begins with the word “therefore”, and that word is present in the Greek as well. This is all one big context, so when Jesus is talking about a brother who has something against us, He’s not referring to just any old offense. He’s referring to the times when our anger has led us to say or do something ungodly to a brother, and we owe them repentance and an apology. In such circumstances, Jesus’ message to the Jews is that if they’re about to present a gift on the altar of the temple, and they realize that their anger has caused them to sin against a brother, they need to leave their gift, make things right, and then come back and offer it. The implication is that until we make things right with the brother, things won’t be right with God either.

The application here is not immediately obvious to us. After all, we no longer bring gifts to altars under the new covenant. However, this passage should certainly inform the way that we understand 1 Corinthians 11:27-28. Sometimes, our appreciation of the Lord’s supper can be dulled by the fact that we partake of it so regularly, but we must recognize that it is a very serious and sacred thing. When we eat and drink, we are metaphorically sharing in the sacrifice of Christ. Unrighteous anger makes us unworthy of that sacrifice. As a result, when the plate or tray is passed to us, and we know that an outburst of anger has marred our holiness, it is far, far better to allow that plate to go right on by than to unthinkingly partake. Only after we’ve made our lives right can we eat and drink without incurring condemnation.

This, of course, is not an easy thing to do. When I’ve become convinced of my own righteousness and blasted some poor soul who didn’t deserve it, the last thing I want to do is go back to him with my tail between my legs and say, “I was wrong. Will you forgive me?” It’s much easier to go on pretending that we had a right to say what we said. However, we don’t dare continue in sin because of **THE PRICE** that anger carries with it. Jesus discusses this in the final section of this context, in Matthew 5:25-26. Here, He compares the time that we have to seek our brother’s forgiveness to the time that two adversaries are spending together as they’re walking to the place of judgment. We might be tempted to let our apologies to the victims of our anger slide until some time has passed, the wounds aren’t quite as fresh, and we aren’t going to look quite so bad when we own up. Jesus here is warning against that. He’s telling us that the time we have to make things right is much shorter than we think, so we’d better act quickly.

To understand the rest of this example, put yourself in that situation. You and your opponent are going together to court, you know you don’t have a leg to stand on, and you know you’re going to get nailed if this thing goes to trial. What kind of negotiation are you going to be doing? Are you going to hold out for the best settlement possible, or are you going to jump at any kind of settlement at all, because no settlement means disaster? That’s why Jesus tells us to settle things up quickly. When we’ve unleashed our wrath on somebody and we go to them to apologize, that’s not the time to insist on all the ways they’re wrong. That’s the time to settle up without respect for the cost to our pride, because if we don’t make things right, God is going to unleash His wrath on us, and we will suffer forever for it.

If there’s any doubt remaining about the problem that God has with anger and its effects, let’s consider the first two-thirds of the list of the works of the flesh, found in Galatians 5:19-20. Before we start making excuses for our anger, we need to notice how many of the sins listed here spring from anger. Hatred? Yup. Contentions? Certainly. Jealousies? Without a doubt. Outbursts of wrath? Obviously. Dissensions? No question. That’s at least five of the works of the flesh, and we could make an argument for seven of them. By contrast, sexual sin, which is our big bugaboo, which we take such pride in avoiding, is only responsible for three works of the flesh. Don’t get me wrong here. I’m not saying that fornication and uncleanness aren’t a problem for Christians. I’m saying that anger-based sin is an even bigger problem. I very much fear that on the day of judgment, there are going to be a lot of Christians who were faithful to their wives all their lives, but who also allowed their anger to rule them, and are going to be punished for that. What a tragic moment that will be! Each one of us needs to take heed for ourselves, so that we are not ensnared by anger.