

Ephesians 4.26-27

Christian Anger

In the Avengers Movie, the super heroes are battling aliens from another dimension in New York City. Just as this cyborg looking whale comes flying through the sky and the heroes are at their wits end, Dr. Bruce Banner appears on the scene. Now Dr. Banner is a rather mundane looking scientist who would hardly pose a threat to such a terrible foe. So what's he doing there? Well, his poorly mannered alter ego just happens to be The Incredible Hulk. Dr. Banner had been trying to keep the Hulk suppressed so that he would not cause harm, but now Captain America looks at Dr. Banner and says, "Doc—now would be a good time to get angry." Banner looks over his shoulder and says the line that makes the entire Hulk thread of the story work: "That's the secret Captain, I'm always angry." Then he turns into the Hulk and begins smashing things. This line—"That's the secret, I'm always angry"—has given rise to much speculation. Most note that throughout the story Banner is using typical anger management techniques to try to control his anger, and thereby control the Hulk. So what he seems to be saying is that the secret to controlling the Hulk is to give him a continual supply of what he wants, namely, anger, but only in controlled doses, so that Banner can call him up when he wants him, but can keep him under wraps when he doesn't. Depending on your perspective this may sound like a brilliant plan or a ridiculous plan. The fact is, our culture is full of remedies for aberrant behavior that rely on the sin nature. Many treatment methods are a compromise with sin, rather than a conquest of sin. As a child, I had a lot of sinful rage pent up inside of me, and it was not pleasant when someone set me off. I don't recall ever starting a fight, but I did not have the moral strength to walk away from one. To keep me from exhausting my anger in a destructive manner, I was given a punching bag on which I was told to "take out my frustrations." Of course, this didn't quench my fury, it only gave me an outlet on which to spend my sin without damaging anything and costing my parents money. I truly did not come to know any peace until my heart was subdued by the Prince of Peace Himself.

Anger is a powerful force. When lodged in the soil of sin it can produce devastating fruit. In our city and its surrounding counties, we have a high incidence of domestic violence. Men and women provoke one another with caustic remarks that result in endless arguments. Many men unleash the frustration from work or unresolved stresses from a deployment on their wives and children. Many women see their children as an inconvenient obstacle to their individual happiness and treat them harshly out of resentment. While most people are on better behavior outside of the home than in it, we still see evidences of unsanctified anger round about us. Our generation has coined the term "road rage" to describe not only aggressive drivers, but drivers who take out their hostility in risky and even life threatening maneuvers with their car. When I worked in retail it was not unusual for a customer to become irate with an employee; but I knew things were getting bad when customers became irate with each other. I remember an incident in the paint department at Lowes in which a man cussed out a woman because she was served before him, when he believed he was there first. Security had to remove him from the store because it seemed that he was on the verge of punching this woman. Children are not immune to this problem either. While a child's temper tantrum may not seem as big a deal as road rage or assault and battery, their outbursts of defiant back talk, pounding on the floor, and jumping up and down is the same species as murder. We have a problem with anger.

Ironically, our text says "be angry," which is an imperative. It is not an unqualified imperative. But it is an imperative. Is Paul counseling or at least allowing something that is sinful? Is anger sinful? The biblical answer is that while people are often aroused to anger because of their own sinful desires, selfish ambitions, and godless thoughts, and people often react sinfully to their angry feelings, anger in and of itself is not sinful. We can demonstrate this by appeal to God Himself. God expresses anger, but God cannot sin. Therefore, anger is not inherently sinful. Here in Ephesians Paul referred to our former rebellious existence as "by nature children of wrath," which, of course, speaks of our being under the wrath of God because of sin. In Colossians 3.6 Paul warned the Church that on account of sexual immorality,

impurity, passion, evil desire, etc., “the wrath of God is coming.” The wrath of God is the just expression of His anger toward evil and His loving preservation and recompense of the good. In Exodus 34.6 the LORD revealed Himself to Moses by proclaiming His name to Moses. This explanation and proclamation of God’s name was God’s own self-portrait for Moses to behold by the eyes of faith in his inner being, just as his physical eyes saw the bright manifestation of God’s glory like lightning. In this self-description, the Lord proclaimed that He is “slow to anger.” He does not say “without anger,” but slow to anger. God is very patient, Peter says, in order that all God’s people would be brought to repentance. But, even though His fuse is long (so to speak), it does have an end. The Old Testament often speaks of the cup of God’s wrath or fury. It may be a very large cup that takes a long time to fill; but when it is full He does pour it out on the offenders of His glory.

Jesus also expresses a righteous indignation several times as recorded in the gospels. In Mark 3, Jesus is in the synagogue with a crippled man. He asks the crowd whether it would be lawful for Him to heal this man on the Sabbath or not. When no one answered, presumably because they did believe it was forbidden to do acts of charity on the Sabbath, Mark says: “And He looked around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart” (3.5). So Jesus was angry at the sin in the hearts of the people. In John 11, Jesus is at the tomb of His friend Lazarus, and John tells us twice that Jesus was provoked in His spirit and “greatly troubled” according to the ESV, but perhaps better understood as “irate.” I agree with those interpreters who understand Jesus’ perturbation to be at the result of sin, which is death, as it has laid hold of his beloved friend. So, Jesus is angry about sin in the hearts of people and angry at the painful and deadly results of sin in His beloved. More examples could be given, but suffice it to say that God’s holy wrath and Jesus’ righteous indignation demonstrate that anger is not inherently sinful.

Perhaps an analogy with another greatly abused gift of God will illustrate how anger, which is often misused by us, is, nevertheless, not inherently sinful. God gave mankind sexual capacity and even appetite. He commissioned mankind accordingly to “be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.” Furthermore, the intimacy of the husband and wife relationship, described as “the two shall become one flesh,” is fundamentally about the relationship of Christ and the Church, according to Ephesians 5. So, human sexuality is for the glory of God. Now, can it be perverted? Sadly, it not only can be perverted, it quite often is perverted. But man’s unbridled sexual perversion does not make sexuality inherently evil. It shows how we can take something that God created good and use it for evil purposes. The same can be said of anger. Yes, even anger, is given to us as God’s image-bearers to be used as a reflection of the holy love and righteous mercy of our Redeeming God in this fallen world.

So, the question Paul deals with here is: How can we be angry to the glory of God?

Be angry about those things God is angry about.

The last thing we might expect to find in the Bible is the imperative “be angry.” Now, obviously the instruction “and sin not” is the main point. That we feel and express anger is the assumption. And yet, I do believe Paul intentionally used the imperative rather than the concessive. Anger is not only allowed or expected, at times it is required in this fallen world. John Stott expounds on this necessity with his typical practical precision saying, “The verse recognizes that there is such a thing as Christian anger, and too few Christians either feel or express it. Indeed, when we fail to do so, we deny God, damage ourselves and encourage the spread of evil. . . . I go further and say that there is a great need in the contemporary world for more Christian anger. We human beings compromise with sin in a way in which God never does. In the face of blatant evil we should be indignant not tolerant, angry not apathetic. If God hates sin, his people should hate it too. If evil arouses his anger, it should arouse ours also. ‘Hot indignation seizes me because of the wicked, who forsake Thy law.’ What other reaction can wickedness be expected to provoke in those who love God?” (Stott, 185-86).

When the Third Reich was arresting and exterminating millions of Jews, Gypsies, and anyone else deemed unfit for Hitler’s purified, super race, the German Church revealed its vacuous spirituality when Christians refused to cry out and

stand against the injustice. Dietrich Bonhoeffer and others formed the Confessing Church and, fueled by righteous indignation, opposed these governmental atrocities. We may not agree with Bonhoeffer's involvement in an assassination plot, but neither can we agree with the indifference of so many Christians.

God is angry at sin, since sin impugns the majesty and holiness of the Creator and Sustainer of all things. As moral creatures, made in the image of God, it is right and good to be angry when God's glory is assaulted by human wickedness. Unfortunately, most of our anger is not concerned for God's glory at all, but for our own glory. When we've been insulted we get angry. When we've been inconvenienced we get angry. When we've been ignored or mistreated or disrespected we get angry. When our desires have not been satisfied we get angry. This is what James calls the wrath of man; and he says, "the wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God" (James 1.20). What angers us can help to reveal what we really cherish. If my anger is aroused by affronts to my own glory, then perhaps I am putting too much stock in myself.

Ask yourself, "Am I angry because my feelings are hurt, my pride has been wounded, or things are not going my way? Or, am I angry because God's glory is being eclipsed by human sin?"

So, the first answer to the question "How can I be angry to the glory of God?" is "be angry at those things that God is angry about."

Second, be angry about your own sins that you might be more charitable when others sin against you (Calvin).

Are you right to be angry about something someone says or does? Consider Jesus' warning in the Sermon on the Mount. "Judge not, that you be not judged. For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you. Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? . . . You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye" (Matt 7.1-5). I like unexpected answers. Christians often ask what your favorite verse is. Someone once asked Spurgeon what was his favorite verse. He answered, "Whatever verse I happen to be on at the time." One of my friends told his congregation, "Next Sunday I'm going to expose the meanest member of the church." Everyone was burning with the question of who was going to come under the preacher's ire. The following Sunday he announced his text, James 3, with the title "The Tongue: The Meanest Member of the Church." Well if someone asked, "What is the one sin you hate more than any other?" our answer should be, "My own." I hate my own sin more than I hate yours. I hate my own offense against my Jesus more than all the murders and thefts in Fayetteville. I hate my own cooperation with Christ's enemies more than I hate all the gang activity and drug dealing in the schools. When I consider my own sin and what I deserve apart from the mercy of God, your sin against me seems much less offensive. Get angry at your own sin and you may find it easier to forgive those who sin against you.

Ask yourself, "Is my sense of justice less charitable with others than it is with me? Or, do I judge others as I would be judged?"

How can I be angry to the glory of God? First, be angry at those things that God is angry about. Second, be angry at your own sins that you might be more charitable when others sin against you.

Third, use anger to fuel your resolve for righteousness.

Even if we are justifiably angry we can act in an unjustifiable manner. God forbids murder and abominates the mistreatment of the weak and helpless. When we consider the atrocity of abortion, we should be angry. Our anger should move us to action. But our anger must not move us to sin. We cannot condone the bombing or vandalizing of abortion clinics or assaults on doctors who perform abortions. We can, however, take up the cause of the unborn in the courts and in public discourse.

Be angry and sin not. Righteous indignation must never be an excuse for sin. It must be motivation to establish righteousness.

Ask yourself, “How can my righteous indignation be mixed with sin and ruin the cause of righteousness? How can my righteous indignation serve the glory of God and the cause of His righteousness?”

So, how can I be angry to the glory of God? First, be angry about those things that God is angry about. Second, be angry at your own sins that you might be more charitable when others sin against you. Third, use anger to fuel your resolve for righteousness.

Fourth, be quick to resolve provocations to anger.

Paul says, “do not let the sun go down on your anger.” Paul uses a different word for anger that has to do with the cause of the anger. Sometimes we may speak of an angry welt from a bee sting. The stinger or venom would be the irritant that causes the symptoms we refer to as angry—red swollen tissue. So Paul would say, “Remove the stinger and draw out the venom.” There may still be some pain for a while, but start dealing with the source of the problem ASAP. While we may never lash out in vengeance against someone who has wronged us, we often enjoy private revenge against someone by murdering them over and over in our hearts as we brood over their injustice against us. Too often when people feel they’ve been sinned against they don’t talk to the person who offended them; instead, they talk to everyone else about their offense. In Romans 14.19 Paul tells us to “Pursue what makes for peace;” and in Ephesians 4.3 he says we are to be “eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” This means that when someone sins against us in such a way that we cannot merely overlook their offense, we need to waste no time in working things out. Ask yourself, “Am I brooding over an injustice without seeking resolution? Or, am I actively pursuing what makes for peace?”

So, how can I be angry to the glory of God? First, be angry about those things that God is angry about. Second, be angry at your own sins that you might be more charitable when others sin against you. Third, use anger to fuel your resolve for righteousness. Fourth, be quick to resolve provocations to anger.

Finally, by Spirit-controlled anger share in the victory of Christ over the devil.

Several commentators have noted that in verse twenty-seven Paul uses the term *diabolos* or devil, rather than his more usual term “Satan.” The term “devil” may be used to focus on his lies and slander, since that is what devil means. Unbridled anger is often expressed in harsh words that are a caricature of the truth or distortions of the truth about someone. Sinful anger keeps a record of wrong and rehearses it to your own soul and quite often rehearses it to anyone who will lend you an ear. This wrath of man also likes to remind the person you’re angry with of all of his or her faults. Of course, the place where the devil loves to see unbridled anger work in concert with an unbridled tongue the most is in the church. When Christians vent their rage on each other, especially in judgmental language, pointing out each other’s failures without forgiveness, we are doing the devil’s job for him. He is the “accuser of the brethren who accuses them day and night before our God.” You know that the devil loves when Christians fight and war with each other and fall into hateful thoughts and words. This gives him just the entrance he needs to set up shop in the church. “Go ahead and nurse that grudge against your brother. He should never have done that to YOU! . . . Did you notice that so and so didn’t speak to you this morning before ABF? She obviously thinks she’s too good to talk to you. She’s such a snob. Why don’t you mention her snobbery to the lady next to you? Of course, share it as a prayer request so that it doesn’t come across too much like gossip, you know.” That’s all it takes, and the devil has his foot in the door.

Revelation twelve tells us the exciting results of the death of Jesus: “*Now war arose in heaven, Michael and his angels fighting against the dragon. And the dragon and his angels fought back, but he was defeated, and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. And the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world—he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him.*”

And I heard a loud voice in heaven, saying, "Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come, for the accuser of our brothers has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God. And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death. Therefore, rejoice, O heavens and you who dwell in them! But woe to you, O earth and sea, for the devil has come down to you in great wrath, because he knows that his time is short!" (Revelation 12:7–12)

By the blood of Jesus there is no longer any place in heaven where the devil can stand to accuse you before God! What a glorious gospel truth! But if the devil can't kill your soul in the court of heaven, he will try to do as much damage to you as possible here on earth. "But woe to you, O earth and sea, for the devil has come down to you in great wrath, because he knows that his time is short!" Do you want to share in the victory of Christ over the dragon? Then just as Michael and his angels gave the devil no quarter in heaven, let us give him no place in the Church.

Ask yourself, "Is my anger going to give place to the devil? Or, is my anger going to shut the devil down by the blood of Jesus Christ?"

Don't be his lackey by allowing your anger to go unchecked in the church, in your home, or in your life at all. Instead, be angry for the glory of God. How? First, be angry about those things that God is angry about. Second, be angry at your own sins that you might be more charitable when others sin against you. Third, use anger to fuel your resolve for righteousness. Fourth, be quick to resolve provocations to anger. And then, by Spirit-controlled anger, you will share in the victory of Christ over the devil.