

Ephesians 4 (26-27) – Is Your Anger Right or Wrong?

In Ephesians 4:20-24, the Apostle Paul was describing the conversion of a lost person to a saved person. In vs.25-32, Paul moves from describing what happens *in* our salvation experience to what happens *because* of our salvation experience, giving us practical applications.

In vs.26-27, Paul talks about anger. Biblically speaking, it is characteristic of a person with a new spiritual nature to have a new sort of anger, a righteous anger that honors God. However, we need to draw a clear distinction between the righteous anger that Paul is commanding and the sinful anger he is forbidding. We must also understand that a righteous anger can descend into sinful actions if we are not careful. That is why this passage includes a means of protection.

Be angry – We don't normally associate anger with righteousness, but this is a command to adopt a certain kind of anger, a righteous anger, which is not a sin. Righteous anger is God-centered, while sinful anger is self-centered. God-centered anger is when you're angry because God is attacked, His person and purpose are dishonored, and His will and ways are disdained. Self-centered anger is when you're angry because you feel attacked, you have been dishonored, your purposes have been disrespected, and your desires have been denied.

Paul isn't saying that it is okay to get angry as long as you don't act on it. He is not telling us that it's okay to get angry because we have been annoyed, frustrated, or irritated. He isn't telling us that it's okay to be mean-spirited, joyless, and out of control. He's not giving us license to lose our temper because that isn't the fruit of the Spirit. What he's telling us is to be people who hate the things God hates for the reasons that God hates them.

Righteous anger is directed at evil, it is anger toward things that are against the Lord, His will and His purpose. A love for God, for holiness, and for people fuels a "righteous indignation". Violence against women, sex trafficking of children, addictions which enslave others, greed which impoverishes others, the hatred of false doctrine, our indignation at dishonor done to God, and wrong to man, and anger at the sin in our own life, this is justifiable anger.

John the Baptist demonstrated a righteous anger against religious pretense (Matthew 3:7), and gross immorality (Matthew 14:3-4). The Apostle Paul, when dealing with false doctrine, and false teachers, demonstrated this righteous anger in very strong terms (**Acts 13:8-10** / Galatians 5:12). The Bible calls on all of us as individuals to detest and resist evil (cf. Romans 12:9).

The local church is to foster a righteous anger. Consider **2 Corinthians 7:8-12** (cf. 1 Corinthians 5:1-13 – the case of a man who was sleeping with his stepmother). Look at how Paul describes their repentance in vs.11: they had developed a righteous "indignation". Real repentance issues out in a righteous anger toward our former sins. We hate what our former sins had done to us, and don't want others to suffer the same consequences. We love the sinner, but not the sin.

Be angry and do not sin (quoting Psalm 4:4) – "be angry" in that verse means to tremble inside, to stand in awe of God, and by so doing, refrain from the sin you're in. To fear the Lord is to hate evil (Proverbs 8:13), and to depart from evil (Proverbs 16:6). The fear of the Lord causes us to be angry against the evil that tries to stir up within us. We hate what sin does to people.

Jesus knew anger; He drove out the moneychangers near the beginning of His ministry (John 2:13-17), and again near the end of His ministry (Mark 11:15-17). This wasn't sinful anger, but righteous anger. Jesus was indignant over the idolatry against God and the injustice against people. **Mark 3:1-5** – Jesus was angry at the Pharisees, not because they were angry at Him, but because of how they dishonored God, hindering His work and refusing to show compassion. Yet it was a grieving anger; Jesus saw the devastating effect of sin on their lives.

When we see immorality and injustice, we should be angry because of the effects these things have on people. But like Jesus, it should be a grieving anger. Practicing righteous anger means reacting against actual sin, being more concerned with the offense against God than the offense against yourself, and expressing your anger in ways consistent with Christian character.

Certainly, we need to be angry at sin, sinful legal decisions, and sinful practices. For example, we should stand against the practice of abortion, the normalization of homosexuality, and the legalization of psychotropic drugs. However, we need to guard against giving the impression that we are simply angry because our political agenda is being hindered.

As individuals, our anger should grow out of a concern at the negative effects of sin on people's lives, how it destroys genuine community, and limits human flourishing. We ought not to be known for getting angry just because we aren't getting our way, and we certainly shouldn't be known for flying off the handle when things don't go our way. Our anger should come from a desire to see what's in the best interest of other people, and not in defense of our own interests.

Be angry and do not sin – Be angry at your own sin, and when considering the sins of others, be angry for them, not angry at them. There is a righteous anger and a sinful anger, and all anger that is not of a righteous nature is of a sinful nature. Anger of this sort is destructive. **James 1:20** – sinful anger will not accomplish God's will. **Matthew 5:22** – anger is tantamount to murder. **1 John 3:15** – Christians might "hate" someone for a time, but a life characterized by sinful anger is not a saved life. **Proverbs 14:29, 15:18, 16:32, 19:11, 19, 22:24, Ecclesiastes 7:9.**

We can encounter sinful anger when we try to apply biblical authority. For example, let's say that a visitor asks if they can minister in your church. But this person is in the midst of an unbiblical divorce, or they are living with a partner whom they are not married to, or they have announced that they are a practicing bisexual. As a pastor, you inform them that they will not be allowed to perform at your church. It isn't hard to imagine other scenarios you could apply. Some people will respond in sinful anger when you place restrictions on them because of their sin. They might reply with something like, "Well, excuse me, but is *your* life perfect?"

The answer is no, it is not, but that is not the issue. The issue is when you are saying that you are serving the Lord, and that you want to serve the Lord, but you are openly in rebellion, going against the will of God in defiance. As Christians we won't live perfectly but we will live purposefully, and you are avoiding God's will and purposefully pursuing a sinful course.

We can't pretend to be serving the Lord while at the same time actively and openly rebelling against the Lord. Now of course we shouldn't go around looking to stop people from doing otherwise godly things just because we don't like some aspect of their life. But remember, this

isn't a person who is struggling with sin; this is a person who is living in sin. We must be careful in drawing the lines, but if we are to be faithful, we must draw lines at times.

The most authentic thing any of us can do is to faithfully pursue holiness and obediently follow after Christ. No, we won't all do that at the same speed or depth. Yes, we must be patient with people, and we are all called to do that (**Galatians 6:1 / 2 Timothy 2:24-26**). We have to leave a "space for grace", room for God to work, but that also means there comes a time when we must insist that people conform to the truth, or else we are failing to be faithful in the name of being nice. It is a tragedy that we live in a culture where grace is demanded for sins that have neither been confessed nor repented of. Of course, you cannot "demand" grace anyway.

Yes, everyone is broken, but authenticity comes when we collectively push each other, with mercy, and by grace, in the direction of Christlikeness. We must take responsibility, even when, and sometimes especially when others won't. To participate in allowing the open, defiant rebel to pursue their own agenda while assuming to serve the Lord is to partake in their idolatry, and to make ourselves into holiness hypocrites. It is not pastorally or personally wise. In this scenario, it is not a case of us being angry at them; it is a case of them being angry at God.

Sometimes people will be in sinful anger but try and say that it is a righteous anger, when it is not. And even when we start in righteous anger, it can descend into sinful anger. So it is important to be on the lookout for clues as to which anger we are experiencing.

As we said earlier, sinful anger is not God centered, it is self-centered, and it makes living for the truth become second to living how we want. Sinful anger will often be out of control, it has no patience, and it might express itself through rage. Sinful anger will attack the person before it addresses the problem. Sinful anger doesn't have good motives; it isn't aimed at the righteousness of God. Sinful anger is vindictive, bitter, reactive, irritable, and it will involve itself in gossip and slander, it never gives in, it looks to cut people off, and it leads to regret. We have to be diligent in making sure that we put away the anger that used to characterize our lives, and put on the new sort of anger, the righteous anger that should characterize a born again Christian. Of course, this can be a difficult task. And so God gives us a means of protection.

do not let the sun go down on your anger – this is a way to keep us from entertaining sinful anger in our lives, and to help us prevent a righteous anger from turning into a sinful anger. This phrase doesn't mean you have permission to harbor sinful anger for one whole day, as if you can be angry at someone all day long as long as you give it up by bedtime. This isn't meant to be a simple relationship remedy or a marriage counseling technique. Yes it certainly applies to our marriages and other relationships, but you don't hold onto that sinful anger all day and then flip the forgiveness switch at night. No, you deal with it right now, or as soon as you can. Yes, if you can't deal with it properly until you get home, then that's what you do. But you don't hold on to that sinful anger until then, you go to God immediately. You need to attempt to make things right ASAP; to reconcile our relationships is a top priority (cf. **Matthew 5:23-24**).

The phrase is meant to remind us that we are prone to allow righteous things to become sinful things. We can take a righteous anger and demonstrate it in sinful ways. We can let a righteous anger crossbreed into other areas of our life, and it mixes together, and explodes outward. You

see, with many people there is a latent unforgiveness, bitterness in the soul, and they are looking for a place to pour their anger into. And so the righteous anger we should have is mixed together with that free-floating anger, and it gets channeled into one big ball of rage which is then projected out on a target. Surely we have all been part of this one way or another.

Sometimes we see this with an angry person who takes up a seemingly righteous cause, but it is really just for the sake of getting angry. They think the rightness of the cause gives them license to project their sinful anger. Yes, we ought to “channel our anger” into positive things, but we should want God to change us, we aren’t supposed to be looking for a place to “stew and spew”.

Sometimes we see a person compile a list of all that is wrong in the world, and then proceed to give their proposals to fix it. They feel as if this gives a righteous vent to their sinful anger. And many of the things might indeed be wrong, and might need a radical fix, but the impetus was not really just a desire to see those things set right, but a desire to attack and destroy what they think has hurt them. Many petitions, movements, and websites feed off of this sort of anger.

We see this when individuals are used as targets by political parties, governments, and advertising agencies. There is a lot of animosity floating around today, just looking for a place to land. Taking advantage of this “free-floating anger” is part and parcel of the art of propaganda. Successful propaganda is the art of demonization, creating a portrait that incarnates the idea of what we wish to destroy, so we will react rather than think, and automatically focus our free-floating hostility, indistinct frustrations, and unnamed fears. It often works like a charm.

The protection of vs.26 keeps us from giving in to sinful anger. We can have a righteous anger, but if we allow it to stew in us for days on end, and we keep our focus on it without letting up at all, before long we turn sour and sinful. We need to take each days offense and give it to God and be done with it. When we see or read or hear of something that we ought to be righteously angry about, we do what we should about it, but we don’t let it stay and stew in us. A righteous anger should shake us out of our complacency, but it shouldn’t destroy our peace. Holding on to sinful anger is like taking poison and hoping someone else dies from it.

and give no opportunity to the devil – this is our motivation for putting into practice the putting away of our anger, even our righteous anger. To linger in anger is to open a door for the devil. The Greek word that the ESV renders as “opportunity” means a spot, a location, or a place. When it comes to anger, it is not how we feel, it is how we deal that matters most. Vs.26-27 tells us what to do. Sometimes we don’t need counseling advice, we need obedience training. We must deal with our sinful anger, and we need to deal even with our righteous anger in the way that Paul is instructing us. Look at this verse and realize...The devil is looking for a place...The devil has no place unless we give it...but sinful anger gives the devil a place.

The devil cannot touch us in an eternal sense, but he can wreak havoc in a believer’s life in the temporal sense if we give him the opportunity through our sinful anger. I want to point out that these commands are given in the context of a body of believers, a local church. The devil is looking for a place to attack the church through the sinful anger of its members. As individuals, and as a body, if we don’t deal with our anger in the biblical way, the devil comes right on in through the church door. That ought to motivate us to righteous anger, and righteous action.