

OVERCOMING ANGER

Ephesians 4:25–32

Early in the 1970's a promising young American pianist gave a concert in the chamber music room of the Erawan Hotel in Bangkok. A few moments into his opening piece he discovered that a certain key on the piano—one critical to the piece he was playing—was sticking. In addition, the piano stool had been oiled so excessively that he was constantly spinning around and facing the audience.

Without stopping his first piece, he transitioned to his next number only to discover that another key began to stick. To try to loosen the keys he began kicking on the bottom side of the piano which caused one of the legs to give way, slanting the piano toward the floor. Too frustrated to continue playing, he marched off stage and reappeared with an ax with which he began to chop the piano to pieces. He stopped only when restrained by police. It is safe to say that what the audience witnessed that night was a full-blown temper tantrum—anger in full bloom.

Today we have people shooting each other on the freeway in America over incidents that ten years ago would have just produced an expletive or two. People feel no hesitancy today in taking out their rage against another person in ways that end up sending them to jail or prison. Anger for many people is an uncontrollable emotion.

Ironically, anger can often do more harm to the person who expresses it than to the person who is on the receiving end of it. Someone has said, “Anger is an acid that can do more harm to the vessel in which it is stored than to the person on whom it is poured.” Therefore, there are two reasons to learn how to defeat anger: to protect both the person who is angry as well as the person toward whom anger is directed.

Ephesians 4:25–32 is a key passage in Paul's epistles that will help us identify, and defeat anger.

RECOGNIZING SINLESS ANGER (4:26A)

Paul says something in **verse 26** which will surprise many Christians: **“Be angry, and do not sin.”** The implication is, of course, that there is an anger which is not sin. It is possible to be angry without sinning. Anger has such a negative connotation that many people assume it is always sinful to be angry.

Before we clarify what Paul is saying, let's make sure we understand this: Paul is not giving permission here for the venting of frustration and rage. That is not the permissible anger he is talking about.

Getting one's anger out is a popular theme in pop psychology today, but it has no Biblical basis. For instance, in *The Message*, Jesus' words in **Matthew 5:22** are rendered this way: **“I'm telling you that anyone who is so much as angry with a brother or sister is guilty of murder.”**

Paul says anger is a work of the flesh (**Galatians 5:19–21**), and **Proverbs** says **it is a fool who vents all his feelings (Proverbs 29:11)**. I have even read where secular thinkers are reconsidering the idea that venting anger is helpful. Studies indicate that venting one's rage only makes one angrier and solidifies those negative emotions.

So what is Paul referring to when he says to be angry, but do not sin? The answer is found in the life of the Lord Jesus Christ. There was more than one occasion on which He expressed anger, yet we know that He lived without sin. Therefore He wasn't manifesting self-centered rage or hostile venom toward others. Whatever He was doing, He was being angry without sinning.

The clearest expression of Jesus' anger is recorded in **John 2:14–15** when He drove the merchants and money-changers out of the temple in Jerusalem. To understand why Jesus did what He did, we have to understand what was happening in the temple.

The money changers and merchants were extortionists, cheating poor pilgrims out of their money. When Israelites came to the temple to offer a sacrifice, the animals they brought would be disapproved by the temple officials. They would be forced to purchase “approved” animals at an inflated price from the corrupt merchants and money changers. Jesus' anger was first directed at the injustice toward temple worshippers.

The second reason Jesus was so angry was because worship of God was being obstructed by the booths and tables set up in the Court of the Gentiles. This area of the temple was for Gentiles to come who wanted to worship the true God. They couldn't get near because the Court of the Gentiles had been turned into a mall of animal sellers and money changers.

How was Jesus' anger different from ours? His anger was never about His own “stuff”—His own agenda, His own schedule, His own rights, His own preferences, His own desires. That's what our anger is almost always about. His anger was over injustice and unrighteousness as manifested in the temple of Israel. That is the sort of righteous anger that is acceptable to God and that is not sinful. It would not hurt for Christians to express more of that kind of righteous anger toward the injustices in our world today.

On another occasion Jesus became angry at a group of people in a synagogue because they resented Him healing someone on the Sabbath (**Mark 3:5**). They were more concerned about the letter of the Law than they were about the spirit of the Law. They were more concerned with perfection than they were with compassion.

There is an anger that is righteous and not sinful. But it is always directed at the abuse of righteousness and justice and love and compassion. It is not used as a tool of retribution when we don't get our own way.

RENOUNCING SINFUL ANGER (**4:26B**)

In the same text there is also a kind of anger that is sinful—an anger which is not to be nurtured or condoned lest the devil see an opportunity to arouse bitterness and resentment in our lives. That kind of anger, Paul says later in **verse 31**, is to be put away from the believer's life. Sinful anger is by far the kind of anger that we are tempted to express most often. Here are some ways to avoid being defeated by sinful anger.

Don't Nurse Your Anger

When Paul says not to let the sun go down on our anger, he is saying, **“Don't nurse your anger.”** Don't protect it and coddle it, giving it an ongoing place to live in your life. Be done with it in short order. While sundown is used here as a figure of speech, it is an excellent way to assess the state of your anger. If there is something you've been angry about during the day, make sure you put an end to it by the end of the day. Don't sleep on your anger—especially if your anger has been directed toward your spouse.

When we choose not to get rid of our anger, the danger is that it will become something worse than anger. Anger turns into resentment, and resentment turns into bitterness, and bitterness turns into the inability to forgive, and the inability to forgive turns into a defiled conscience. Pretty soon, we have become captives of our own anger. We can't think about anything except the person or issue which is the target of our anger. But if we release our anger by confessing it to the Lord and settling accounts if necessary with another person, we avoid the prison we were on the verge of creating for ourselves.

Let bedtime be a reminder: Am I nursing sinful anger toward anyone or anything?

Don't Rehearse Your Anger

Secondly, don't rehearse your anger. Some people love to tell others how angry they are. Henry Brandt used to say that when a person says to someone, "You make me so angry," they are saying something that isn't true. No one can make you angry. If you express sinful anger it is only because there is anger in you already. If another person does something that draws that anger out of you, the anger is not their fault—it's yours. If there was no anger in you to begin with, they could do the same thing and it would produce no sinful response in you at all. No one can cause us to become something which we are not.

When we verbalize our anger to another person all we are doing is confirming it, making our convictions deeper: "Yes, I am angry. That person has hurt me. The more I say it, the more I know I'm right." Verbalizing our anger just makes the roots of that anger go deeper and deeper into our heart. And the deeper the roots go, the harder it is to dig that anger out when you finally do realize you need to stop it. Don't make anger a part of your conversation. Like an actor, the more you rehearse the part, the more natural it becomes for you to play it.

Don't Converse about Your Anger

This is almost the same as not rehearsing your anger. While rehearsing your anger is done for the purpose of convincing and justifying yourself, conversing about your anger to others takes the form of corrupt communication coming out of your mouth (*verse 29*).

In the New Testament, the word "corrupt" was the word for "cutting." Paul is saying don't let words which have a cutting effect come out of your mouth. Americans have almost made a sport out of sarcastic, cynical, cutting forms of speech. Because it is so prevalent in our culture, it is easy to pick it up without even realizing it. That is not to blame the culture. We Christians are to blame for not practicing and obeying the Word of God. I believe Christians should purpose to remove sarcasm altogether from their vocabulary because of the danger of setting off a cycle of that kind of speech between two people once it is begun.

I recall learning a lesson about this kind of speech with a friend of mine. We would get together often for lunch, and good-naturedly rib each other, cut one another down, the way friends will often do. But suddenly my friend stopped being available for lunch; he would hardly acknowledge me when we were around one another. And so I went to him to find out what was wrong. It turns out something I had said in one of our sarcasm sessions had lodged in his heart and hurt him deeply. After we reconciled our relationship I purposed that I would never run the risk of damaging another person with "corrupt" cutting speech again.

Anger can fuel cutting communication. You can find yourself saying corrupt things about, or to, another person if you are harboring anger in your heart. Don't allow anger to fuel cutting conversation. The kind of speech we are to be characterized by is edifying speech, words that impart grace to the hearers (*verse 29*). Words that build up another person cannot be fueled by anger. Therefore we are to put anger aside.

One final point about conversation fueled or characterized by anger. If you associate with people who speak this way, you run the risk of speaking that way yourself (*Proverbs 22:24-25*). I don't like to be around angry people, and I hope you don't either on an ongoing basis. It's very difficult to be around that kind of person without becoming that kind of person yourself.

Don't Disperse Your Anger

Fourth, don't disperse your anger—nor your bitterness, wrath, clamor, evil speaking, or malice (verse 31). Sinful anger is just one of a number of sinful responses and behaviors that is not to proceed from the life of a Christian, a person controlled by the Holy Spirit.

To use modern language, I think Paul is talking here about a person who throws a temper tantrum when he can't get what he wants. Since my children are all grown, it's been many, many years since I've seen anything close to a temper tantrum. But occasionally I will see one of my grandchildren have a fit just because he can't get what he wants, how he wants it, and when he wants it. Even if they were old enough to talk clearly they couldn't explain why they're so angry. They're just mad! And they're dispersing that anger onto everyone who happens to be around.

Anger is nothing more than a sophisticated version of a temper tantrum. Just because we can define it with eloquent speech doesn't mean it is any more justified. We are still mad that we can't get what we want. And our anger overflows out of us and defiles everyone around us.

Instead of nursing, rehearsing, conversing about, and dispersing our anger, we need to reverse our anger before it hurts us and others.

Do Reverse Your Anger

How do you reverse anger? Paul says (*verse 32*) you do it with forgiveness and loving kindness and tenderness. You go to the person towards whom you have directed your anger and you minister to that person.

Paul says in *Romans 12:20–21*, “*If your enemy is hungry, feed him; If he is thirsty, give him a drink; For in so doing you will heap coals of fire on his head.*” What does it mean to heap coals of fire upon someone's head? This expression grew out of an Egyptian custom. When a person had done something wrong, in order for him to express his contrition and shame for what he had done, he would place a pan of hot coals on his head to express the burning shame within his heart.

So Paul says when we do good to those who have done us evil, when we go to that person and we show them love and tenderness, we put coals of fire upon their heads. We in essence shame them because of what they have done to us. We reverse what they have done to us by doing good to them.

So how do you reverse your anger? How do you heap burning coals upon the head of a person towards whom you have been angry, and who may have in fact done something to hurt you? See if you can figure out some way to demonstrate love towards him. But note: The point is not to shame the person. That still has an element of self in it. The point is simply to love him. If shame arises it will do so on its own when sin comes face to face with pure love. We are to love others in the way that God in Christ has loved us.

Is there someone today at whom you are angry? Overcome the anger. A tender action of forgiving love is a weapon the giant of anger cannot withstand.