

Unburdened of Anger (Matthew 5:21-25)

For the Travelling Light Series (Part Five)

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Anger: A Primary Enemy to Kingdom Goodness

When Jesus starts giving practical advice in the Sermon on the Mount, the first thing He talks about is *anger*.

Dallas Willard has said, as a result, that the first step in establishing kingdom goodness in the life of a believer is dealing with anger and contempt.¹

Here's what Jesus said, starting in Matthew 5:21-25:

²¹ "You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' ²² But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, 'Raca,' is answerable to the court. And anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell.

²³ "Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, ²⁴ leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift.

²⁵ "Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court. Do it while you are still together on the way, or your adversary may hand you over to the judge, and the judge may hand you over to the officer, and you may be thrown into prison. ²⁶ Truly I tell you; you will not get out until you have paid the last penny.

Dancing with the Hulk: The Ambivalent Place of Anger

The Hulk stands as one of our culture's best images for anger. Like the Hulk, our anger makes us stronger and a little more invincible. It gives us energy to do things that are sometimes helpful.

Our brains and bodies have circuits and networks designed for anger and aggression. There are situations in which anger is adaptive and helpful—like protecting children from predators.

God also gets angry. When He saw the Israelites worshipping the Golden Calf He said: "Now leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them." (Exodus 32:10a)

What is it that makes God angry? Proverbs gives a hint in 16:16-19.

There are six things the Lord hates,
seven that are detestable to him:

- ¹⁷ haughty eyes,
 a lying tongue,
 hands that shed innocent blood,
¹⁸ a heart that devises wicked schemes,
 feet that are quick to rush into evil,

¹ See Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy*, 147.

¹⁹ a false witness who pours out lies
and a person who stirs up conflict in the community.

Given this, Jesus can't be saying 'never get angry'.

Anger also has a problem like the Hulk, though. Anger likes to smash.

From hitting umpires at little league games, to pulling guns in road rage, to World Wars, anger and contempt are instrumental in a host of human problems.

Two major problems with anger: it makes us act in haste, causing damage we don't mean. And it encourages us to nurture contempt by holding on to wrongs suffered.

Firecrackers: Haste

Much of human anger is something like a firecracker going off. A short fuse that leads to a short and loud bang, but then can cool off.

Human anger is a defensive instinct. When triggered, it can have us acting out in ways that work in the short term but aren't good long term.

Jesus' example of anger is name calling. "Raca" was an Aramaic name related to the word for empty—maybe like, bonehead or numbskull. Fool carries a little more weight and in Greek it's *more* from which we get 'Moron'.²

Name calling is not done in the first degree. It's a manslaughter kind of thing, not premeditated. It's the type of firecracker explosion anger can inspire.

Firecrackers might not seem like much on their own. But line up a bunch of them, near some fuel, and they are a big problem.

Defusing Firecrackers: Taking Space

One of the other clear teachings on this kind of anger comes from the book of James:

¹⁹ My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, ²⁰ because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires. ²¹ Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you.

Human anger does not lead to righteousness because it is often selfish. It's about self-defence.

God is slow to anger because He has no need to defend Himself. So, His anger is the type that is premeditated and can be mitigated. He doesn't just explode.

When we feel anger, we often need to take space to make sure our explosions don't set off chain reactions. When we feel anger coming on, it's a good idea to get some distance and process that anger physically. Then, we can come back clear headed and less defensive to the problem.

Forest Fires: Holding On

² See John Stott, *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount*, 65.

Some anger isn't just a short explosion, some of it is a long burn.

Dallas Willard calls this type of anger *contempt*. It's treating others as enemies and therefore inferior because they've hurt you.

Contempt, like a fire, only grows when you feed it. Contempt only grows when we *hold on to the wrongs done to us*.

Dousing Forest Fires: Letting Go

I had a coworker I disagreed with a lot, encourage me to keep 'short lists' with him. What he meant by that was, whenever he'd hurt me or made me mad, I should bring it up as soon as I can.

We come sometimes act like we're God or something, having to keep a list for all the wrongs done in the cosmos. But the Bible teaches us, really, to have no list at all.

Paul's great word on anger in Ephesians 4:26-28:

"In your anger do not sin: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry and do not give the devil a foothold."

Jesus is making a similar point to Paul here in our passage—when He talks about leaving gifts on the altar and being reconciled on the way to court.

It's almost a joke. If you were making a sacrifice, it had to be in Jerusalem. But Jesus is talking to people in Galilee, some 80 miles from Jerusalem.

So, if you're there in the big city making an offering and you know somebody has reason to be angry with you—get running.

Paul says it a different way, like we are supposed to check our lists daily and make sure we aren't ending days without making a move to let go of our anger.

Some people take this all literally, and that's sometimes caused them some real trouble—fighting at night is not a good idea. The point for both Jesus and Paul is that letting go of whatever we've got against others, and reconciling whatever they have against us, is top priority. Deal with it as soon as you can.

Why?

Because anger held onto and nurtured is a primary way Satan makes his home in our hearts, our families, our cultures. Don't believe me? Go read Hitler's life story. A young man who served in World War I, disillusioned, angry, and defensive over his fatherland. He nurtures that anger for years. And you know what happens next.

A Recipe for Letting Go—in Three Layers!

There are three layers to letting go of the wrongs suffered to keep away contempt.

First, letting go of vengeance. This is what Jesus means by 'turning the other cheek' (Matt. 5:39). We break the cycle of redemptive violence by committing to not seeking retribution.

Justice and vengeance are different. Justice is about protecting society and helping a person reform. Vengeance is about making them hurt like they've hurt you. You can forgive someone for their abuse—by not abusing them—and still hold them accountable in a legal sense.

Second, letting go of thoughts about the wrongs suffered. Often when people close to us make mistakes our hurt us, our defensive minds bring up a long list of past wrongs. We create narratives and stories.

Paul says to let go of anger every day. Jesus tells us to pray for daily bread, daily forgiveness, and daily safety against temptation.

Start with a blank slate with people, every day. Deal with the wrongs in front of you and don't go dragging up the past. Short lists.

Finally, letting go of the feelings. Jesus does want freedom for us, which means that sometimes we can get complete healing from wrongs suffered. Maybe even a restored relational wholeness. This is not necessary, however. How we feel about others is not what matters for forgiveness as much as not taking vengeance.

The Light Yoke: A God Who Takes Care of You

Of course, sometimes things are really messy. Sometimes it's completely beyond our power to deal with any of these layers.

Paul himself experienced that. He writes to his mentee Timothy in 2 Timothy 4:14:

“Alexander the metalworker did me a great deal of harm. The Lord will repay him for what he has done. You too should be on guard against him, because he strongly opposed our message.” (2 Timothy 4:14)

We're not entirely sure who Alexander was. Maybe he was there in that riot in Ephesus that got Paul heading out of Ephesus. We don't know. What we do know is, Paul was hurt by him. Hurt bad enough to warn others to keep away from him.

How does Paul deal with somebody like that?

“The Lord will repay him for what he has done.”

That's it. Like two sentences reserved for his greatest enemy ever. Stay away.

Final judgement belongs to God. So, when we can't reconcile or forgive, we leave it in the hands of the God who will take care of us.

It's that same God that invites us to live in a Kingdom of relational wholeness and reconciliation. Who wants to establish lives where anger and contempt are dealt with, and we live in peace.

Questions for reflection:

1. What has got you angry right now? How does it feel to dwell on that anger?
2. What side of anger do you struggle most with now: acting in haste out of rage or seething in contempt? What might be behind that for you?
3. Depending on your proclivity, consider memorizing or writing down either James 1:19—for haste—or Ephesians 4:26 for contempt. Incorporate it into prayer.
4. Who do you need to reconcile with, or what wrong do you need to begin the journey of 'letting go' over? Who can help you start that journey?