

Daniel S. Teefey
Riverside Covenant Church
July 11, 2010
Anger – Mark 3:1-6

Last night was playing around with my sermon on our laptop and I had just added a few thoughts that I thought might be helpful. I reached over for my glass of water and somehow I hit my wrist on the power button of the computer and off it went. Awesome. I had not saved my notes since I added the new stuff, so I waited for the computer to reboot to see if the content was there and sure enough it was gone.

So today's sermon is about anger.

I know that not everyone here this morning is a sports fan, but this week has been really wild in terms of NBA basketball. One of the best players in the league, LeBron James, recently became a free agent and entered into potential negotiations with several NBA teams. There has been a ton of speculation about his decision and which choice he would make. He has played for the Cleveland Cavaliers his entire career, but decided on Thursday via primetime hour special on ESPN that he is now going to play for the Miami Heat with a couple of his friends. The media hype and the 1 hour decision special was a little over the top, but what has really made this a spectacle is the reaction to LeBron James' decision.

The anger has been amazing, especially from people in Cleveland that believe that James has betrayed them. There are photos of people weeping and screaming at their televisions. There are photos of people burning LeBron James jerseys. And then I could not help but be a little shocked when I saw the anger of the Cleveland Cavaliers owner in an open letter that he wrote to Cleveland Cavalier fans and posted on the team's website. **See if you can sense a tone to this letter:**

"Dear Cleveland . . . As you now know, our former hero, who grew up in the very region that he deserted this evening, is no longer a Cleveland Cavalier. This was announced with a several day, narcissistic, self-promotional build-up culminating with a national TV special of his "decision" unlike anything ever "witnessed" in the history of sports and probably the history of entertainment . . . You simply don't deserve this kind of cowardly betrayal."

Then he throws in a little jab about the kids. “This shocking act of disloyalty from our home grown “chosen one” sends the exact opposite lesson of what we would want our children to learn. And “who” we would want them to grow-up to become.”

So that is what anger sounds like. One headline referred to this letter as the **“Wrath of Cavaliers’ Owner Dan Gilbert.”**

As we proceed through our sins in Galatians 5, this morning we arrive at “fits of rage.” “Fits of rage” denotes a fierceness, indignation and unbridled anger. It is fury or wrath.

Like some of the other terms that we have looked at, we find anger used in different ways throughout the Bible. Both “wrath” and “anger” are used in positive and negative ways.

Now, let me just address this briefly because it can be frustrating as we study the Bible to hear that the same word can mean different things in different contexts. But this is simply how language works. We have a broader base of experiences and emotions than what our language is capable of describing. We have all experienced moments when we did not have the words to describe something. Similarly, we occasionally use the same word for two different things. **If I tell you that I am going to meet you at the “bank,” I could be speaking of Lafayette Savings Bank or the bank of the Wabash River.** It is not a contradiction, but simply two different uses of the same word. **In a similar way we might describe someone as “aggressive.”** If they are playing basketball, this could be a good thing and simply means they are active. If they are dating your daughter, this is clearly a bad thing. Same word, different uses and thus meanings.

We find this with “wrath” and “anger” in the Bible. So context becomes essential to understanding what is meant.

In Galatians 5, the use of “fits of rage” (wrath in some translations) is negative. It points to something that is unhealthy and detrimental.

There are plenty of other verses in the Bible that also talk about anger in a negative way.

Psalm 37:8, **“Refrain from anger and turn from wrath; do not fret—it leads only to evil.”**

Proverbs 29:11, **“A fool gives full vent to his anger, but a wise man keeps himself under control.”**

Colossians 3:8, **“But now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips.”**

There are plenty more too. Like “hate,” which we discussed a few weeks ago, anger is often described negatively because it regularly moves towards the destruction of others.

When the Bible talks about anger in a negative sense it is usually referring to intense negative feelings or emotions towards something that does not deserve such a reaction. Anger is particularly viewed as a negative within a Christian community. In Galatians 5, in the list of the “acts of the sinful nature,” “fits of rage” is listed in contrast with the “fruit of the spirit.” “Fits of rage” hinder community and “love, joy, peace, patience, etc” encourage community.

Notice too that our translation in Galatians 5 does not just say “rage,” but “fits of rage.” At first glance it seems insignificant, but now that I have two toddlers I know what a “fit” is. Our children throw fits where they express emotions in a manner that is out of control. One example is when we are shopping and our child may want something, a piece of candy or gum. We tell them “no” and they proceed to throw a fit. They are expressing disappointment and pain and frustration, which are all legitimate things to feel . . . but the intensity of their expression does not match the gravity of the offense . . . i.e. flopping around on the floor crying and whining, is not appropriate for not getting candy.

In the most general sense, anger is a feeling or emotion that ranges from mild irritation to intense fury and rage.

It is important to understand anger on this spectrum. And anger becomes sinful when it is disproportionate to the cause. For instance, it was not wrong for me to feel irritated, annoyed and slightly angry when my computer shut off . . . but it would have been radically disproportionate and sinful if when it happened I reacted by throwing the computer through the window, kicking the dog, and burning the house down. It would have been ironic too, since the sermon was on anger.

I shared with you several verses that speak of anger negatively. Here are a few that presume its existence and call us to control it.

Paul says in Ephesians, **“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.”** (Ephesians 4:26-27)

James 1:19-20 says this, **“My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires.”**

Each of these verses presume the existence of anger, therefore acknowledging that in some form it is not inherently wrong. But what is wrong is if we sin in anger or get angry too quickly or hold onto our anger.

Then on the other end of the spectrum, we have examples in the Bible of anger being a good and acceptable response. The passage I want us to look at this morning is a good example. Jesus, our perfect model for life, is said to have been angry.

Read Mark 3:1-6.

In this passage it says that Jesus was angry. So what was he angry at?

Jesus is confronted with a man that has a withered hand. We don't know what happened or the medical condition that may have caused it, but it is dry, hardened and shriveled.

Jesus is in the synogogue on the Sabbath, the day that all Jews are to refrain from any work. There is a gathering of people and many Pharisees. Jesus calls the man with the withered hand before the crowd and asks a question, **“Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?”**

The Pharisees responded with nothing. Dead silence.

You see the Pharisees are legalists, and if the law says not to do anything on the Sabbath then you do not do anything on the Sabbath, good or bad. They had become so obsessed with enforcing the law that they had forgotten its purpose.

The Pharisees and the law did provide some exceptions on the Sabbath. One ancient exception, for instance, said that, **“any danger to life takes precedence over the Sabbath.”** Then of course the Pharisees had documents that explicitly and extensively outlined what exactly constituted an immediate danger to life and to what extent aid could be given.

The problem in this case is that the man's withered hand was not an immediate threat to his life. In the Pharisees' mind, Jesus could simply wait until tomorrow to heal the man. Jesus, however, wanted to use this instance as an opportunity to show the Pharisees how hollow their understanding was.

Jesus shifted the debate from doing work on the Sabbath to whether one should refrain from doing “good.” And he asks the Pharisees what is lawful, to do good or evil?” Silence.

The passage then says, **“He looked around at them in anger and, deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts.”**

The ignorance and the callous legalism made Jesus angry and deeply distressed. He was angry because God was angry. In their concern for legal detail they had forgotten the mercy and grace of God. In the name of piety they had become insensitive both to the purposes of God and to the sufferings of men. Jesus refused to observe the traditional rules; he moved in grace toward sick individuals and healed them without regard to the day of the week.

Then notice how our passage ends with a deep contrast. Jesus calls the man to stretch out his hand and he heals it. Jesus transforms human flesh and a life. The text says the Pharisees, **“went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus.”**

It reminds me of John 10:10, **“The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.”** The anger of Jesus leads to transformation and comes from a deep

desire to see the Pharisees know the truth. The anger of the Pharisees leads to death . . . it is motivated by self-interest and self-protection.

So if anger appears in so many different contexts in the Bible, how do we seek the anger of Jesus rather than the anger that Paul discourages and lists as “fits of rage” in Galatians 5?

We have to first understand the nature of anger accurately. There are several misconceptions about anger that must be immediately dispelled. **1) Anger is not inherited.** The expression of anger is a learned behavior and ultimately we have a choice in how we choose to express frustration. We are in control of what we do with our feelings of anger. **2) Anger does not us to get what we want.** Aggression is not the same thing as assertiveness. Expressing ourselves in an assertive manner does not blame or threaten other people and minimizes the chance of emotional harm. **3) It is not always good to vent anger.** Most research has found that people who vent their anger aggressively simply get better at being angry. It is most preferable to learn how to avoid acting aggressively from anger even if the object is a pillow.

Anger is usually a habit. When we face particular situations or events in our lives our anger is provoked. A whole range of situations can provoke our anger: long waits in line, traffic congestion, being wrongly accused of something, having a neighbor that plays their music too loud, or having money or property stolen from you.

And when we are faced with these annoying circumstances, the anger swells up inside of us and manifests itself in different ways. Our heart rate increases, our chest tightens and we may even begin to feel hot. We might clench our fists or teeth and raise our voice.

Such a strong reaction usually arises out of deep feelings of fear, hurt, jealousy or disrespect. And in our mind, amidst the anger, we may begin to picture acting out in aggression and seeking revenge.

We do not just hurt people when we act out physically from our anger, though. A dirty look, a slight snub, a little edge in the voice, the neglect of some little habit of kindness – these are actions characteristic of anger, and we use them as punishment of the object of our anger.

What do we do then with our anger? One very effective strategy is taking a time-out. In its simplest form, it means taking a few deep breaths and thinking instead of reacting. It may also mean leaving the situation that is causing the escalation or simply stopping the discussion that is provoking your anger. **This strategy is very closely related to James' call for us to be “slow to be angry.”** Timeouts slow the process down and force us to process what we are doing rather than responding instinctively with a bad habit.

What is fascinating about anger and other destructive emotions and feelings is that it is never the triggering events themselves that produce feelings such as anger; it is our interpretation and beliefs about the events. Often we will blame the triggering event rather than ourselves. We might say something like, **“it is not my fault that I got angry and flipped that guy off in front of the kids, he cut me off.”** Or, **“I can't help it when I scream at my wife, she drives me crazy.”**

The reality though is that lots of other people face similar circumstances or events and have alternative reactions. We have a choice of how to react. **Our reaction is not dependent upon what happens to us.** Ultimately we choose to move feelings of frustration at someone cutting us off, to feelings of deep anger and rage.

A proper reaction to anger provoking circumstances is to act assertively. Acting assertively involves standing up for your rights in such a way that is respectful of other people. The basic message of assertiveness is that my feelings, thoughts, and beliefs are important but your feelings, thoughts and beliefs are equally as important. By acting assertively, we can express our feelings, thoughts and beliefs to the person who violated our rights without suffering the negative consequences associated with aggressions.

So when someone runs their grocery cart into the side of our car at the grocery store and it angers us, instead of staring them down with a hateful look and secretly hoping that they get hit by a car in the parking lot . . . we assertively tell them that something needs to be done. Uncontrolled anger desires their demise and schemes to make it happen. Assertiveness seeks to move forward in a way that protects both the offender and the victim.

Most of the time, we respond inappropriately with anger because we have learned to respond this way.

We have seen other people do it. The interactions we had with our parents strongly influence our behaviors, thoughts, feelings and attitudes as adults. But the fact that we have seen others behave in this way is not an excuse for the people of God to be reckless in anger. You need to break the cycle for your children.

When we find ourselves spiraling downward into the bitterness of an angry exchange, we should take the initiative of saying a kind word, telling a joke on ourselves, offering compromise or making a gesture of reconciliation.

What ultimately makes Jesus' anger different than ours is that his anger was based on his love. It is because Jesus loves the man with the withered hand, and because he loves God and his kingdom, that Jesus is angry at those who would obstruct compassion and plot against his life. **It is hard to argue that our flipping off the guy who cuts us off in traffic is out of love for anyone other than ourselves.**

And Jesus' anger is not a permanent state. By all estimates, the second those that he was angry at entered into true repentance, his desire to see them forgiven would overwhelm his focus on their sin.

So here is the struggle. Anger is not necessarily sin, but sin is a constant and generally present danger when anger is concerned. Sin is always close by.

The primary problem with our understanding of anger is that we get upset at things that are not a big deal, but then don't have anger towards those things that deeply trouble God. We are like toddlers throwing "fits of rage" over candy. We become irate at Lebron James, or bad drivers, or frustrating computers . . . all the while not caring much about the thousands every day that die of poverty, the injustices in our own community, the legalism and hypocrisy of much of Christianity . . . all things that God is deeply angered by.

There are things in our world that should deeply trouble us.

Consider a person who is completely disinclined to get angry. Nothing you can do will anger them. He's walking down the street with his old mother, and a couple of neighborhood bullies walk up calmly, push

her into the street and spit on her. She's upset and weeping, and he says, **"Aw, mom, I'm sorry that happened, but quit complaining; that sort of thing happens all the time in this neighborhood."**

This man's failure to get angry is actually a defect in his character. Maybe he doesn't care enough whether his mother gets humiliated; or maybe he's so cowardly that he'd rather condone the bullies than arouse their wrath by condemning them; or maybe he doesn't have enough sense of his own dignity, and his mother's.

Our problem is being too slow to anger about the things God hates . . . and too quick to be angry about the things that God probably cares less about.

God calls us to have his heart. The heart of Jesus that did not fall into "fits of rage" over everything . . . but only angered over those things that were truly matters of life and death.

Sources Consulted:

May, Sharon Nearhoof. "Healing Anger." Brethren Life and Thought 50, No. 1-2 (Winter-Spring 2005).

Roberts, Robert C. "Tempering the Spirit of Wrath." Christian Century 114, No. 19 (June 1997)

Smith, Blaine M. "Wrath Control." Christianity Today 47, No. 2 (February 2003).

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. "Anger Management for Substance Abuse and Mental Health Clients." (2002)