

Anger Happens
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Ephesians 4:25-32
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- I. I don't know about you, but I was taught, as I was growing up, that Christians are not supposed to get angry.
- A. And there were certainly some good, sound reasons for the adults in my life to teach me that.
1. I mean, after all, Jesus said, *But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment.*
Matthew 5:22
 2. And Paul said, *Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice.*
Ephesians 4:31
 3. And there were other passages like that.
 4. The lesson was obvious—Christians should not get angry.
 5. And that is the lesson the church has taught across the centuries.
 - a. It has defined anger as one of the seven mortal sins.
 - b. And it has insisted that Christians, as people of love, are to be selfless, caring, and inoffensive. People who never get angry.
- B. But if the truth be known, one of the things often hiding behind our Sunday smiles *is a struggle with anger.*
1. Despite all that good teaching, we still find ourselves getting angry at times
 2. We may not be happy with the anger in our life; we may not be proud of it.
 3. But many of us do struggle with anger. It's an issue we can't avoid.
- C. So what do we do about the anger that shows up unbidden in our lives, especially in light of the fact that Christians aren't supposed to get angry?
- II. Well, the first point I want to make is that all this teaching about Christians not getting angry is an absolute crock that sets up an impossible standard that no one can live up to – and should never be expected to live up to.
- A. That's because anger is an emotion—over which we have little or no control.
1. We can't decide whether or not we will be angry.
 - a. If we are, we are.
 - b. Anger just happens.
 2. Now there are ways in which we can decrease what we get angry about and how much anger we feel.
 3. But still it's inescapable that anger happens, and the real issue is not whether we get angry but what we do with our anger.
- B. Now although we all experience anger and know what it is experientially, I doubt if many of us could phrase a definition of it.

1. So I composed this definition—Anger is a state of arousal we feel when things don't go the way we want them to or we or someone important to us is offended, slighted, put down or threatened.
 2. “State of arousal” is pretty much self-explanatory—we experience it as heat, turmoil, agitation, or an unsettledness that rushes up in us.
 3. And what underlies that arousal usually consists of some kind of frustration or offense.
- C. Now holy as he was, even Jesus got angry.
1. In Mark 3 when the Pharisees refused to respond compassionately to the man with a shriveled hand, *Jesus looked around at them in anger.*
 2. And in Mark 10, *When Jesus saw (the disciples rebuking the parents bringing their children to be touched), he was indignant.*
- D. Now if it's okay for Jesus to get angry, it must be okay for us to get angry too.
1. But if, as I just said, the real issue is not whether we get angry but what we do with our anger, we have to look at what Jesus did with his anger.
 2. And what we see is that Jesus controlled his anger and chose to not ventilate it in order that he might advance the work of the kingdom of God
- E. So the challenge we have is to emulate him in controlling our anger, in choosing not to ventilate it, and in advancing the work of the kingdom.
- F. Now I'm going to suggest that the best way to do that is to pay special attention to what the Apostle Paul said in today's reading from Ephesians 4:26, *In your anger do not sin: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry.*
1. When Paul says, *In your anger, he's conceding that Xns get angry—that anger happens.*
 - a. He doesn't say, “If you slip up in your Christian commitment and inexcusably get angry.” Rather he says, “In your anger,” or, in other words, “When you get angry, as you most surely will from time to time.”
 - b. Paul is acknowledging that anger happens, and it happens to Xns.
 2. But then when he says, *Do not sin, he's making the critical point that we have a choice about what we do with our anger.*
 - a. We can choose *sinful ways of expressing our anger which give the devil the foothold he warns about in v. 27, or we can choose non-sinful ways of expressing our anger.*
 - b. It's this possibility—that we can chose among a variety of options of

what to do with our anger that is so surprising to many people.

(1) There are millions of people who don't realize they have a choice about what to do with their anger.

(2) For them the possibility of choosing not to blow up and ventilate their anger is just about as realistic as choosing not to fall after stepping off a cliff.

(3) They feel as powerless when gripped by the emotion of anger as they feel when gripped by the force of gravity.

(4) They feel they have no option but to explode, to rage, to ventilate their internal pressure.

c. But the truth is that they do have choices about anger.

d. Despite the arousal, they can choose better ways of response.

G. So we're going to take a look at some of the choices we can make.

III. First what are some of the "not so positive *choices*" *we can make when anger happens?*

A. The first "not so positive *choice*," which is really the default for many people, is to ventilate their anger verbally—to release the pressure of the arousal they feel with their mouths.

1. So they explode, they let it all hang out, *they become verbally violent.*

2. This explosion has two components.

3. The 1st component of ventilation is the content of what people say.

a. It consists of an attack on what or who has caused their anger.

b. It includes blaming, *belittling, name calling, demands and threats and often profanity.*

4. 2nd component of ventilation is the way in which people say what they say.

a. This often includes increased volume and yelling.

b. It includes sarcasm, tension, *stridency, bawling others out.*

5. Ventilating is verbal violence which can be quite emotionally destructive.

B. A second "not so positive *choice*" *we can make is to become physically violent.*

1. We can throw, hit, slap, strike, punch, kick, beat, shoot, kill.

2. This is often added to and coordinated with verbal violence.

C. A third "not so positive *choice*" *is to become verbally abusive in subtle ways.*

1. Instead of using the volume and stridency of ventilation, one can devastate

- a person just as crushingly with a subtle comment.
 - a. The put-down that comes clothed in conversational tones.
 - b. The comment that has a hidden barb.
 - 2. We can express some powerful anger by subtly belittling, shaming and ridiculing in conversational tones.
 - D. A fourth “not so positive *choice*” *we can make is that we can plot and exact revenge.*
 - 1. Scariest because it is done in cold blood, not in the heat of passion.
 - 2. Someone may live for years quietly, subtly preparing for the devastation of someone who has sparked his or her anger.
 - 3. Movies often follow this story line—someone biding their time, plotting and waiting till the perfect moment to wreak revenge on someone.
 - E. Now it’s important for us to notice that these “not so positive *choices*” *attempt to damage or harm the other person and care nothing about the relationship.*
 - F. These choices are driven by emotions.
- IV. But there are choices we can make to handle our anger in more positive ways.
- A. These choices are the product of our mind, and they attempt to maintain the relationship while working at resolving the offense that has caused the arousal.
 - B. The critical first step in making any alternate choice is to slow our instantaneous reaction to our arousal to give ourselves a choice about how to respond to it.
 - 1. This means to give our mind a chance to respond to the situation instead of our emotions.
 - a. Our mind does a far better job of weighing options.
 - b. Our mind has a much better sense of what is good and fair and just.
 - 2. Now slowing our instantaneous emotion-driven default reaction *requires a fairly advanced state of self-awareness.*
 - a. It means you don’t just go with the flow of the arousal.
 - b. But you stop and consciously think, “I’m feeling angry and how I respond to my anger reflects on my Christian faith.”
 - 3. Just that one step of slowing our instantaneous response to the arousal and giving our mind a chance to enter into the issue means that we don’t have to go with the default.
 - a. It gives us the opportunity to consciously choose how to respond.
 - b. It makes it possible for us to do what Paul says in Ephesians 4:26, *In your anger do not sin.*
 - 4. Now it is possible to *slow our instantaneous response and give ourselves time to think and to still make the “not so positive choice” of ventilating in a destructive way.*

- a. A person might say “I’m angry about what she just said. I could choose a mature way of working at this.”
 - b. But then say, “Nah,” and let her fly.
 - c. Hopefully that won’t happen very often.
- C. Instead, having given yourself a choice by slowing your instantaneous, emotion-driven, knee-jerk reaction, you can choose to choose a relationship-affirming way.
 - 1. You can say, “I choose not to ventilate my anger.”
 - 2. Rather than blowing up at the nincompoop who has just ruined your whole life you can say, “I am angry about what you just did, and here is why.”
 - a. Careful, calm processing of anger decreases the arousal you feel.
 - b. And at the same time it avoids offending the other person and gives them a chance to respond in an appropriate way.
 - c. Your response allows for rational discussion of the problem.
 - d. It allows for clarification of the possibility that the anger is the result of a misunderstanding.
 - e. It allows for processing of different understandings.
 - 3. And it keeps open the possibility of maintaining the relationship.
 - 4. This is the main alternate choice to ventilation we have.
 - a. Recognizing that we are angry.
 - b. Calmly reporting that we are angry.
 - c. Processing what has happened.
- D. A second alternate choice we have is to examine ourselves for why we are angry and to make sure that our anger is justifiable.
 - 1. We can ask ourselves what’s going on here?
 - a. Am I angry because I’m just being selfish?
 - b. Am I stumbling over *pride and wounded self-esteem*?
 - c. Is this really a worthy position I’m getting angry about?
 - 2. We might conclude, after giving our minds a chance to review what’s going on that we should just simmer down.
- E. A third alternate choice we have is that we can view the situation from the other person’s point of view.
 - 1. It’s surprising how many times we will conclude that if we were in the other person’s shoes we would have done the exact same thing.
 - 2. We jump to our anger ignorant of what led that person to do what he or she did, and once we understand their motivation, we agree with it.
 - 3. Or we might conclude that what made us angry was a completely unintended consequence.
- F. All of these things point to what Paul is getting at when he says*Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry.*
 - 1. Process your anger. Be aggressive in getting rid of it.
 - 2. Resolve it quickly.
- V. Now earlier I said something about the fact that there are ways in which we can decrease what we get angry about and how much anger we feel.

- A. That, despite my title, anger doesn't always have to happen.
 - B. What I'm talking about here is an ability to not get angry as a result of depth of Christian character.
 - 1. When we are in correct relationship with God we are less concerned about our self and our interests and we are more concerned about relationship.
 - a. We're more loving, compassionate and forgiving.
 - b. We care more about the other person and their interests.
 - c. We are less easily frustrated.
 - 2. And that means that we just simply have less to be angry about.
 - a. We become less fragile. We are less easily offended.
 - b. I think that's what we see when Paul says *Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love, (Eph 4:2) and Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. (Philippians 2:3-4)*
 - c. To the degree that we become less self-centered and more other-centered we can decrease our reactivity to things that threaten our self-esteem and have less to become angry about.
 - d. We don't have that rush of arousal. Anger doesn't happen.
 - 3. To the extent we still experience anger, it will likely be the same kind of anger which Jesus showed—anger not at frustrations or at offenses directed at himself, but anger at offenses directed at others.
- VI. So what is the final conclusion here?
- A. Anger happens. It is an emotion that is generated by our experiences of life.
 - B. But we can make choices about what we do with the emotion.
 - 1. Some choices are more negative in nature—generally they're the choices we make when we think we don't have any choices.
 - 2. Some choices are more positive in nature—they're the choices we make when we give ourselves time to recognize what's going on.
 - 3. Spiritual maturity will inspire us to more positive choices.
 - C. And going beyond that, we can develop a character that doesn't have the same degree of problems with anger.
 - 1. To the degree we develop patience, humility, and a concern about the interests of others, we are less likely to experience anger.
 - 2. It's unlikely we will ever fully eliminate anger from our lives—not even Jesus did that.
 - a. But we can greatly decrease it.
 - b. And we can develop a means of choosing relationship—affirming ways when we do experience it.

- D. We can step off a cliff and decide, “Nope, I’m not going to give in to gravity. I’m not going to plunge into ventilation and rage and getting even.”
- E. Instead I’m going to choose not to fall, I’m going make my way back to solid ground, I’m going to refuse to alienate my friend. And together we’re going to work out this thing that has come between us. I’m going to choose to not do anything that threatens my relationship with my friend.”