

## EPHESIANS #66 4:26-27 4-21-13

### *DEALING WITH ANGER*

(Ephesians 4) Any baseball fans here? Yea, we got ‘em, even in Pittsburgh which has not been kind to baseball fans. You know, baseball, more than football, hockey or even basketball is a rather quiet, less intense activity. George Carlin used to do a bit on the comparison. He noted that in baseball the goal is not to penetrate the other team’s defenses and take new ground. No, in baseball the goal is to go home and be safe – to be safe at home. Not as many high adrenalin moments. But what can really get you going at a baseball game is when a manager goes off on an umpire. Like this guy (start video <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TGZUKHtW7vg>) You’ve seen these moments when the manager gets right in the face of the umpire and tells him off with tremendous vigor and intensity. It is sort of baseball’s equivalent of the hockey fight. But it makes you wonder about the emotional stability and personal maturity of the manager. Now, listen, I coached basketball for about fifteen years and I understand how easy it is to reach a quick boiling point with an official in a competitive situation. As you watch this video of a manager who gives the longest and most elaborate tirade I have ever seen, I want to ask you – do you have an anger problem? Do you have a microwave temper like this guy? If so, our study today is for you. But, some of you have cooler heads than this manager. You aren’t one to fly off the handle quickly, but your thing is the slow boil. You get something stuck in your craw and you let it stay there and simmer. Some of you marrieds have done this with each other. You have remained married but it is lacking in joy, without any real intimacy. You can’t seem to grow anything fruitful in the soil of your relationship and if you could dig just below the surface you would discover the reason - a layer of calcified anger. Do you have a crock pot temper? Our study is for you too.

We are in a section of Paul’s letter to the Ephesians in which he covers a hodgepodge of issues related to our personal morality. We saw last week the exhortation to speak the truth. Today we come to an exhortation to control our anger. Ephesians 4:**26-27** *Be angry, and yet do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger,<sup>27</sup> and do not give the devil an opportunity.* Now, if I just took the first two words out of this and preached on that we would all leave here feeling a whole lot better about ourselves. There is one command we have no trouble with. Sure, I would have to rip those words out of context, but I would be grammatically correct.

“Be angry” is in the imperative form. The emphasis is on the phrase, “yet without sin” but what you can determine from this passage is that anger, in and of itself, is not necessarily sinful is it? Is anger always a bad emotion? No. Paul suggests here that it is possible to be angry without sinning, and that’s a very good thing because we read in the Bible all the time about the anger, the wrath of whom? Of God. Jesus Christ who is God incarnate gets angry. In Mark 3:5 we read about Jesus getting angry with the pharisees because they didn’t approve of him healing on the Sabbath. It said Mark 3:5 *After looking around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart, He said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” And he stretched it out, and his hand was restored.* You know, I’ve never seen a painting of Jesus that involves this scene from his life and ministry. It would be interesting to see an artist’s notion of what Jesus looked like here. I’ve seen a laughing Jesus, and a crying Jesus but I’ve never seen an angry-faced Jesus. But we have one in this story. We have one as well in the story about him cleansing the temple. John 2:14-17 *He found in the temple those who were selling oxen and sheep and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables.<sup>15</sup> And He made a scourge of cords, and drove them all out of the temple, with the sheep and the oxen; and He poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables;<sup>16</sup> and to those who were selling the doves He said, “Take these things away; stop making My Father’s house a place of business.”<sup>17</sup> His disciples remembered that it was written, “Zeal for Your house will consume me.”* Looks like anger to me. Some have suggested that this was not a very Christian thing for Jesus to do. They have a problem with what Jesus does here, but maybe the problem is with their understanding of what is Christian. Do you need to adjust your understanding to make room for a righteous anger?

Some of you don’t want to do that, and I know why. You don’t want to give your spouse or your boss or whoever any kind of loophole here, and I understand that. Although I agree that there is such a thing as righteous anger I think we seldom actually come up with it. The vast majority of the anger we generate is with sin, and usually plenty of it. We get angry due to pride not humility, self-seeking not love, zeal for self-glory not zeal for God’s glory. What makes the difference between righteous anger and sinful anger? It is clearly the motive behind it. Jesus got angry over hard heartedness. He got angry over abominations in the temple. Moses got angry about that gold calf. Elijah about the worship of Baal. Paul about the teaching of a false gospel. Me? I get angry about a bad call in a ball game, about having to wait too long to get my dinner, about traffic lights that aren’t programmed correctly. Is it hard to see the difference?

One is motivated by zeal for God, the other by zeal for self. One is motivated by love, the other by pride. Ben Franklin said, “*Anger is never without a reason, but seldom with a good one.*” I think he’s probably right. Listen, we need a great deal more anger of the Jesus variety in our day. I’ve often thought our models of Christian behavior to be a little too tame. Biblical characters seem to be marked by a holy anger that few of us display. I pray God intensifies our anger about idolatry, about hypocrisy, about apostasy - but the major point of our text is about keeping in check that more common human anger that leads us to sin. The apostle warns us not to make a very critical mistake in how we handle our anger. After saying *Be angry, and yet do not sin*. He goes on to say, 26c-27 *do not let the sun go down on your anger and do not give the devil an opportunity*. Everybody seems to be in agreement about the sun going down business. The rule here is that you should not let yourself stay mad. Keep short accounts so that you won’t even go to bed at night without addressing this anger problem. The phrase in verse 27, I believe, is all about the same thing. Literally it means we should not give the devil a place. Don’t give him a platform by which he can gain leverage in our lives. And you give him such a place when you allow yourself to grow bitter thru the accumulation of unaddressed anger.

I’ve entitled my second point on the outline, “anger and the devil” but it could easily have been “anger and bitterness.” Anger is a problem. Bitterness is a personal disaster. Anger is what I feel, bitter is what I become, and is precisely what the devil will seek to introduce into your lives when you give him a foothold. He will climb all over you with a spirit of bitterness. Remember the Incredible Hulk? I don’t guess you kids know what I’m talking about, but in the 70s we had a TV show about a man who was transformed into a good-guy monster whenever he saw something that got him boiling mad. The plot for the show was always the same. Some wicked person would do something crummy and then pleasant-faced Bill Bixby would be transformed by his anger into The Hulk, who would then beat up all the bad guys for the rest of the show. This Hulk monster would have been great to have on your football team, but you wouldn’t want to marry him, if you know what I mean. The story, of course, was pure fiction but it did teach a good point. Anger can transform us if we let it. Anger itself affects how we act, but when we let the devil turn it into bitterness it affects what we are. It affects your very personality. Bitterness is a deep anger. Not a surface anger, but a deep anger that impacts how you relate to everything around you. It can happen to anybody but is especially found in those prone to the slow boil I was talking about. You got angry, and you may have never exploded.

You were too civilized for that; but you stewed. The devil has cooked a lot of people in just this way. You think that time will heal all wounds and you are seriously mistaken. Time never healed anything. It just covers over the wound so it's not so noticeable. But bitterness is ruining the lives of many of you right here, and you don't even know it. It is so deep within you. But it comes out in the way you respond to certain things. Bitter people are still responding to things that happened to them twenty years ago that they never resolved. It shows up in hypersensitivity and a critical spirit. It shows up in anger towards those who had nothing to do with the real woundedness that drives your personality. Bitterness is an awful thing. It ruins people and it ruins relationships. And you know where it begins? It begins with anger in the heart that is never dealt with. That is why I connect the line about the sun going down with the line about the devil. They both have to do with not letting anger become bitterness. If you refuse to go to bed at night with unresolved anger in your heart, then there is no way you will grow bitter. You are nipping the problem in the bud. (barney) Bitterness develops when we let our anger sit inside us unattended where it just festers.

The #1 place these teachings of Paul are usually applied is to marriage. Couples are instructed to not ever go to bed angry. Is that a good rule? I think so. I wouldn't be a legalist about it but I think the principle behind it is absolutely critical. Marriages are made or broken on this very point. How do you handle the anger? Do you have your battles, work through the anger, the hurt, the pain. Grow thru it, kiss and make up? Or do you just grow progressively more distant? There are many wrong ways to handle your anger, but one of the worst is to do what is called "stuffing it." In premarital counseling I ask couples to identify themselves as either stuffers or snappers. Those are the two bad ways we tend to respond to our anger. Snapping or stuffing. Stuffing means you just ignore it. Pretend it isn't there. Relationally it means you run away from conflict and seek at all costs to avoid an emotional quarrel, a heated exchange. You don't deal with the anger. You just stuff it deep inside of you, and there it stays until it hardens into bitterness. In marriage the result is one of two bad things. Bad thing #1 is that eventually, all that pent-up anger that is accumulated over the years explodes like a volcano and buries the marriage under the hot wrath of an embittered man or woman. You've known marriages that on one day appeared fine and the next day were terminal. This is why. It can happen over months or over decades. Bad thing #2 is that the couple stays together without intimacy, without sweetness. Theirs becomes a marriage of utility, built around a commitment to the kids or to

their reputation but there is no fun any more for either party. And the devil just laughs his wicked laugh. When we give him a place, by failing to rightly handle our anger we allow the enemy to build a rift and drain the joy out of our fellowship and the life out of a marriage. Hebrews 12:**15** *See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble, and by it many be defiled.* Do you see what this may mean for you? About half of you here are natural stuffers. Others of you have learned to be such. You are very susceptible to this type of creeping bitterness. And I urge you to be alert to what the devil is doing in your life. When you are angry, admit it. Admit it to yourself first, and then, if needed, to the one who offended you. Listen, conflict is part of life. It is part of relationships. Nobody likes it, but you stuffers like it even less than others, and you have to get over that. By your refusal to face up to your anger and work through it you are giving Satan leverage to destroy you and your friendships and your marriage. My wife is a natural stuffer. (I share this with her permission). As a result, she wouldn't say anything when I provoked her. Weeks would go by and she would grow somewhat more distant and detached, and then I would do one more insensitive thing and, "kablooey!" she would burst forth with a long list of offenses that would just crush me and discourage me. I thank God, that my wife loved me enough and loved God enough that when she saw this tendency in herself she was willing to work on it. It has meant a lot of late nights, especially in the early years, but it has preserved the sweetness of our marriage. How much pain we would be spared, how much joy we would know if we followed this simple rule. **26c-27** *do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not give the devil an opportunity.*

Well then, if we must face and deal with our anger, how do we go about that? What does that mean? Does it mean that we just let it all out? Just learn to get things off our chest? No, no, no. You have to face it. You have to deal with it, but you have to do it God's way. So, let's look at three good principles for handling anger God's way. Principle #1 is to wait. Wait! God's word says to be slow to anger, and it's also good to be slow when you are angry. Don't act too quickly. And here is where we snappers get into trouble. I'm a classic snapper temperament. When something disruptive happens my natural tendency is not to stuff it but to let you know right now. And this approach is as fraught with problems as the other. We need to learn not to react too quickly when we are provoked. There are a slew of Scriptural exhortations to this effect. Most of them found in the book of Proverbs. 29:**20** *Do you see a man that is hasty in his*

words? *There is more hope for a fool than for him.* That's because hasty words get you in big trouble. Therefore Proverbs 29:11 *A fool always loses his temper, but a wise man holds it back.* You see, your anger is like a raging horse, ready to attack. Your job is not to let him loose but to hold him back, and then control all that energy and make it productive. For some people that is impossible. Their anger gets the best of them and reveals the worst of them and there is nothing they can do about it. But Christians have hope here because we are granted by God the infilling of the Holy Spirit, and one of the fruits of the Spirit is self-control. Proverbs 16:32 *He who is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and he who rules his spirit than he who captures a city.* And finally, Proverbs 15:28 *The heart of the righteous ponders how to answer, but the mouth of the wicked pours out evil things.* ® The wicked man cannot wait to express himself. He doesn't control his temper, his temper controls him. "Mommy, why do the idiots only come out when Daddy drives?" Because Daddy speaks his mind without passing it through a filter. Listen, the best rule for most of us with quick tempers is to just say nothing – at least at first. When something sets you off and you feel the adrenalin surging and your pulse quickening that is not the best time for making wise and godly evaluations. If at all possible, delay your response. Silence may not be the best response, but if you say something it needs to be better than silence. Often when I'm angry I cannot think of anything to say that is better than silence. So, I need to keep my trap shut until I come up with something good. This is so crucial. In his rules for living Thomas Jefferson wrote, "When angry count to 10. When very angry 100." About 75 years later Mark Twain revised his words this way. *When angry count four. When very angry swear.* You've probably tried that latter strategy but I think we can do better than that don't you? Jefferson was closer to the truth. Principle #1 is to wait.

Principle #2 is to Think. This is what you are supposed to be doing as you wait. The key verse for all these principles is Proverbs 15:28a *The heart of the righteous ponders how to answer.* And I want to give you some guidance for your pondering. First, you think about the offense, the thing that bothered you. And see if you can't penetrate beyond your feeling to see why someone did what they did. What is going on in those persons that made them act that way? How can they be so rude? Lots of reasons. Maybe they acted out of ignorance. They weren't aware that they would be hurting you. More often than not, when I think through what someone has done I discover that their mistreatment of me was rooted in some personal pain they are going through. They are hurting over a major disappointment or a minor

disappointment and as a result they are lashing out at others. I don't excuse that. That person is still responsible for doing so, but understanding the "why" sure makes a difference in my attitude when I see that. My anger dissolves into pity.

The second thing for you to think about is your own response. Figure out what is going on inside of you. Why are you getting so uptight? Larry Crabb says that when we grow angry it is because we have a goal that someone has blocked. And that goal is usually not something we should be so committed to. When my goal is rest and ease it's easy for my wife or kids to annoy me, but the problem is my bad goal. The problem is in me. Get over this business of thinking that the cause of your anger is out there. It is not out there it is right here. The aggravating stuff out there just reveals what is in here. And before you even address that aggravation address the aggravatee. Consider if your anger isn't just rooted in pride and the bad goals it generates. That is why it is good to talk your anger over with the Lord before you approach anyone else. You read the Psalms and you discover David frequently dumping on God about how mistreated he was by others. That is what God wants us to do. David was a model of patience and forbearance in his relationships because he took his problems to the Lord. Typically when I do that the problems dissolve, the anger subsides. And when it doesn't then I plan out with the Father what steps I need to take. Principle # 2 is to think and thinking for us should include prayer.

Principle #3 is to love. You wait. You think. You love. Too often we respond in pride. We act to regain something we have lost. When we spend time thinking about the anger and the aggravation we have to be asking the right questions. God doesn't want us thinking selfishly or proudly or vindictively. Be angry, but don't sin. Some folks take time to think only so they can sin more effectively. One morning a Virginia woman found the family dog standing motionless on the stoop. The dog had been stuffed by her ex-husband. He had obviously given the matter some thought. He didn't do that impulsively. But his thinking was devoid of love. As we ponder how to respond, the question is not, "How can I get revenge, but how can I love?" Romans 12 says **19-21** *Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay," says the Lord.*<sup>20</sup> *"But if your enemy is hungry, feed him, and if he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in so doing you will heap burning coals on his head."*<sup>21</sup> *Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.* That perspective is so, so critical. It reminds us that God is in the justice business. And if God will take care of the justice then we are free to concentrate on mercy. You don't have to be The

Great Avenger. You are to overcome evil with good. Jesus said to love your enemies. That means you look for ways to bless them, to do them good. Now listen, it is certainly possible that doing them good means you confront them over their sin. This gets very delicate. It is hard to go to someone who has hurt you and lovingly reprove them - for their good, not for your satisfaction. But when you have dealt with the issue in your own heart, when you have thought it through and prayed it through and worked out your anger, then you are ready, in some cases, to lovingly approach the offending party. Galatians 6:1 *Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted.* You see there the emphasis on gentleness. I read this week of a judge who brings kids into his courtroom and yells at them and threatens them. I believe there may be a place for that - when it is done strategically, not passionately. That may be the most loving thing in some cases, but not usually. Sometimes when I'm not sure what someone needs, and I am under control, I have said, *I may not act it right now, but I'm angry. I don't think I should yell but you should hear it that way.* (smile) Sometimes that's good. Sometimes not - each situation calls for its own distinctive strategy. But the strategy again is based on what is best for the other person- not based on your feelings. Proverbs 15:28 said that 28b *the mouth of the wicked pours out evil things.* It just emotes all over the place. But 28a *The heart of the righteous ponders how to answer.* The wise person waits, thinks, and then acts and speaks in love.

I close with a personal testimony. For a number of years now the message I send myself and want to send myself when I am provoked is a three point message that goes like this. *Shut Up. Stay Calm. You are loved.* ® Now, what I am giving you today is really no different. Here is why. My first point is "shut-up." You may not prefer that rough language but the point is to wait. Don't make things worse by speaking too quickly. Next I remind myself to "stay calm." For me this means – don't let your emotions lead. Lead with your head, which is the same as our second point. Think. Don't emote. Think. Okay? And then the third point: *you are loved.* That sounds different than a reminder to love others, but it really isn't. What I find is that my capacity to love others is undermined when I forget that I am loved by Jesus. If I feel that my well-being is threatened in some significant way, I can't really love you very well. But when I am walking in the confidence that a mighty Shepherd is taking care of me, then I will love you as I am loved. Shut up, stay calm, you are loved. In the end, it goes back to the gospel and my

trust in the promise of God that my sins are covered and I am far more loved than I could ever imagine. The devastating problem of human anger is resolved through the death, resurrection and gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. But this gospel we must remember at decisive moments. That isn't so easy. And I certainly won't suggest you will find success in this overnight. But you keep applying the lessons of God's word and you will notice a change. Thank God there is forgiveness along the way. So, when you blow it - don't give up. Don't give in. Confess your sin, receive God's grace and press on to becoming that man or woman whose spirit is under control. In so doing we will learn to love others well, we will please our Father and we will frustrate the devil.