

Angry Hearts #2: “I’m Against That”: The Usefulness of Anger (Various Passages)

PRAY

How many of you had an opportunity this last week to get angry?

Right? Maybe I should ask if you had an opportunity this morning!

And for whoever says they didn’t, I guess our next sermon series will be on lying

Things went wrong around me this week, of course... So there were times I got angry

And believe it: There were also times when others got angry at me!

One of the places people seem to get especially angry is on the roads

And one day this week, I was trying to navigate a traffic circle in town

Where the lane markings were badly wearing off

And I ended up accidentally changing lanes in the middle of the circle

Cutting someone off behind me—who just so happened to be a cop

After I pulled over, the officer came running up to my window

And she was mad! She said she was on the way to a

priority call and I’d nearly hit her... After my scolding,

she went back and drove away—no ticket, thankfully

But I couldn’t even be upset... Because, accidental or not, I was wrong

I’d made a dangerous maneuver that happened to endanger someone

Her anger made sense—at least the impulse seems right to us

When we talk about anger, we easily recognize that it is a natural or instinctive emotion

So then we wonder: How could it always be wrong? Are there times when it’s right?

And if it’s ever right, then how can we tell the difference? It all seems so complicated

We either end up feeling a lot of guilt, or a lot of self-justification:

‘It’s only right that I feel this way!’ Or is it?

I’ll make the argument today that the Bible depicts an acceptable, useful side to anger

But that we’ve got to be extra careful about the ways we react whenever we get angry

The first place we’ll **TURN** to is James chapter 4... **James 4 [page #1012]**

If you weren’t here last week, we started out by talking about the anger of God

And how God is righteously, slowly, perfectly, and surely angry

But right away, that tells us that anger *can’t* be inherently wrong

Because there is absolutely nothing wrong in God, yet God does get angry

[tr] But is *human* anger ever right and good? Well, let’s consider some truths together

To start, we need to go back to the definition of anger we established last week:

Anger is a heart-felt, emotional reaction to a perceived wrong

But it can be quite beneficial to recognize when something is going genuinely wrong... And so:

Anger exposes that something is wrong with something we care about

[r] Anger exposes our hearts: It reveals what we care about... And it reveals something is wrong

[r] Anger exposes that something is wrong with something we care about

James 4 has a particular aspect of anger in view: angry conflicts... Which are very revealing:

READ 4:1-2a¹... And so: angry conflicts expose our inner passions and desires

When we don't have an can't get what we want, we fight and quarrel
You could say that anger's embryonic form is desire²
Not all desires are wrong, but when they are thwarted, it upsets our hearts
What this implies is that we don't only get angry because people are morons, or because our hormones are raging, or because of our genetic makeup or cultural background, or because our parents failed us or taught us to react in certain ways, or because we had a bad night's sleep
Those affect us... But the core issue is we have unmet desires, expectations, or demands
Something we care about is messed up... And that makes us angry

Our anger shines a light into the dark recesses of our hearts
It shows all the bad—and good—things that we care about
And when those things go awry, are threatened or lost, we lose our cool
Proverbs 29:11 says, *"A fool gives full vent to his spirit, but a wise man quietly holds it back."*
So in other words, when we vent all our feelings, we are venting from inside of us
Sounds like something Jesus riffed on, in Luke 6:45: *"The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil, for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks."*... What comes out exposes the core of who we are

In 2 Samuel 12, Nathan confronts King David over what he did to Uriah and Bathsheba
By telling him a parable about a rich man who steals a poor man's lamb
David thinks it's a real story, and it says his *"anger was greatly kindled against the man"*
He rants and rages about injustice and how the rich man ought to be punished
Until Nathan goes, *"You are that man."*... So his anger ironically exposed his own sin

But anger can be useful to expose when things go wrong outside ourselves as well
Think of Moses when the Israelites made the golden calf
First, God was extremely angry over their idolatry, yet Moses convinced God to hold off
But then when Moses himself came down the mountain and saw what was happening,
His own anger was inflamed—which I believe was a direct echo of God's anger
It arose when he witnessed a truly horrific, shameful wrong
Exodus 32 says, *"And as soon as he came near the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, Moses' anger burned hot..."*
He then flung the tablets down, melted the calf, and made the people drink it
It seems Moses used his anger to implement God's discipline and judgment on the people
It exposed the wrong, and then it energized him to do what God wanted him to do

For us, our anger against a family member is usually because they've wronged us in some way
Or because we've wronged them and want to defend our pride... But something is wrong
With kids, maybe it's their rebellion, backtalk, or foolishness
With siblings, maybe they're intentionally trying to bug you or get you to react
With parents, maybe we think they're being unfair or unreasonable
Or online, we hear an outrageous story about an injustice in the world
or about a politician doing something that ticks us off, and we go off, adding to the outrage
Because we care about justice, peace, freedom, our nation, or our world
Road rage says that someone has been mean to us or is breaking a law—something's wrong
You could go through every instance of human anger and find a perceived wrong at the root of it

As David Powlison explains: *"Every time you get angry (or don't get angry) you broadcast what matters to you... We evaluate everything—ourselves, others, weather, animals, ideas, dinner, God, prices, current events, you name it. Thumbs up or thumbs down... Anger simply expresses with particular force and emotion our negative evaluations... At its core, anger is very simple. It expresses 'I'm against that.' It is an active stance you take to oppose something that you assess as both important and wrong. You notice something, size it up, and say, 'That matters... and it's not right.' ... The underlying essence of anger is the negative evaluation: active displeasure toward something that's important enough to care about."*

There are countless possible triggers to displeasure... And just as many possible ways to react. But the common thread that runs through all of them is the idea of "I'm against that, and I care."

We reflect God in our instinct to evaluate, feel displeasure, and do something about it. Negative emotions are not inherently sinful... God created us to experience these things, like him

There's a medical test done these days called an angiogram, most commonly done on hearts

Some of you have had this test done before... Some of you may have administered it before

But in it, a special contrast dye is injected into an artery, and then X-rays are taken

The dye helps expose where there are issues in the bloodstream or arteries

It's a super helpful test that has undoubtedly saved countless lives

But the test itself is not the cure... It just shows that you need a cure

To correct issues an angiogram reveals, you need something else, like meds or surgery

Anger used well is like a spiritual angiogram... Rising irritation or offense is a warning sign

It's the dye or an x-ray that shows where issues are inside us... It's a test, not a treatment

Anger is useful to help us see inside ourselves, or to see around ourselves more clearly

This is way easier said than done, especially when our anger "blinds us"

But the more we can pause and ask ourselves: "Why am I angry?", the better

What do I want (or feel I need) right now? Power? Peace? Comfort? Love? Respect?

What might I be afraid of in this moment? Is my control or reputation being threatened?

What do I think I deserve that is being kept from me? Do I feel a right is being violated?

What or whom am I loving most right now? What do I care so much about, right now?

Is there a treasure of my heart that I'm losing—or feel I might lose?

Once we answer the question of why we're angry, we can evaluate whether it's a good reason:

Are my desires or dreams, which are being obstructed, good desires or dreams?

Am I right to value or treasure what I'm at risk of losing right now?

As we saw last week, our anger often reveals that we want to be like God:

In charge, in control, always happy, always honoured by others, and so on

And we get angry when our godlike desires are inevitably frustrated

[tr] Listen: it's OK that the world is upsetting at times... It's an upsetting place

Our world's gone wrong... And anger declares war on the world gone wrong³

However, our problem runs deeper than that... Because our hearts have also gone wrong

Even our emotions, feelings, and motives are messed up and corrupted

So, left to ourselves, we'll tend to believe every reason we're angry is a good reason

But our hearts are deceitful... There's a way that seems right to a man, but it's death

If we each got to discern whether or not our anger is righteous, we'd be in trouble
Because, spoiler alert: In our opinion, *it always is*⁴
So how do we know if our anger is right or not?
When I ask people what their biggest questions on anger are, this is the #1 response:
Is there such a thing as righteous anger? And if there is, when should we feel it?
Here's the answer I believe the Bible would give to us:

Angry emotions are right only when our cares align with God's cares

[r] Our angry feelings are acceptable or righteous only when our cares align with God's cares
[r] Angry emotions are right only when our cares align with God's cares

TURN to **Ephesians 4**, a most famous passage on anger [**page #978**]... **READ 4:26-27**⁵
There's great practical wisdom here on letting go of wisdom by the end of every day
Along with a dire spiritual warning that when we don't, we give the devil an opportunity
to do damage in our hearts... Put another way, we give him a 'foothold'—hard to undo
But for today, focus on the first 6 words: **READ 4:26a**⁶
So it is possible—it must be possible—to feel anger and yet not sin... to reflect God's anger
Remember **James 1:19** says: *"Let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger..."*
Again, not "never angry", but "slow to anger"—like God is slow to anger

Some biblical examples back this idea up: that it is rarely yet sometimes appropriate to be angry
Once in awhile, ever so often, we can reflect a little bit of the way God sees things
I count 15 instances of righteous human anger in the Bible, from 10 people
Though some cases are debateable whether or not their anger was truly righteous
And to be clear: there are *far* more examples of sinful, destructive anger in Scripture!
But we mentioned Moses and David earlier... There's also King Saul, of all people, in 1 Sam. 11
Samuel a few chapters later, after Saul failed... Elisha over his king's lack of faith...
Elihu, who 'burned with anger' at Job and his friends... The psalmist in Psalm 119, who
said: *"Hot indignation seizes me because of the wicked"*... John the Baptist who raged
against the leaders' dishonouring of God... Paul whose 'spirit was provoked' in Athens...
And who also wrote a scathing criticism to the Galatian church...
And, of course, Jesus, on several occasions: his woes to the Pharisees, his anger over the leaders'
unbelief, his distress at Lazarus' tomb, and his wrath during the temple cleansings

So what can we learn from these people? What are apparently right things to be angry about?
Well, multiple of them express anger at the dishonouring or displacing of God, or idolatry
Several also show anger at people's hardness of heart, stubbornness, or lack of faith
There's definitely a clear theme of anger at injustice in these accounts
There's an appropriate anger when it comes to hypocrisy or self-righteousness
As well as with corruption or defiling of holy things—such as the temple or the gospel
Finally, there is Jesus getting angry over the effects of the curse: suffering and death
Dishonouring God, hardness of heart, injustice, hypocrisy, corruption, and the curse
Not coincidentally, many of the exact things we see God express anger over
When our cares align with his, it's right to care and be upset that things are wrong

I read one author describe an anger he felt toward a situation he observed in a grocery store,
When a woman and her son were both exploding on each other

He felt a pity and sympathy, thinking of the brokenness that led them to that place
While also being very upset at how they were treating one another so hurtfully
Hence, his anger was mingled with love... It wanted to do something constructive
He hated how the mom and boy were treating one another
But his anger seemed just and merciful, yearning for the destruction to stop
He longed to fix what was so broken and bring redemption into the picture
See, when our anger is justified and righteous, it will be laced with love and mercy
It will motivate constructive, redemptive problem-solving... Anger *can* be used for good

At the exact same time, there are so many times the Bible outlaws other angry emotions
Such as resentment, hatred, discontentment, revenge, envy, sinful anxiety, lust, and more
There are wrong thoughts to have... There are wrong emotions to feel
And when we struggle with them, we have to learn to let go of them and repent

So there are ways to be angry and not sin... And plenty of other ways to be angry and sin
So how do we tell the difference? By looking again to what God says in his Word
Don't let anyone else tell you that you ought to be angry about something
Don't even trust yourself telling you that if you feel it, it must be OK
Listen to the Lord, and pray that your cares would increasingly align with his

Christopher Ash says: *"In godly anger, we are called to care about the same things God cares about and to be angry over cruelty, injustice, and evil. In our spirit we are stirred to feel the same offense God feels, to hate the way the innocent suffer, and to rail against godless oppression... In the very best of such circumstances we will be living in imitation of our God—concerned with his honour; zealous for his law; passionate about the poor and needy... But the very best of circumstances doesn't happen very often. Much more of the time, imitation of God slides, ever so subtly, into replacement of God. We do that thing that we do. We take his place, and soon it is our honour that we are concerned about, our law that is being breached, and our needs that are stirring us to passionate rage."*

The fact is: We have a God-given instinct for evil to upset us... It is occasionally right
But that does not mean we have a *right* to be angry
The Bible never tells us we *need* to be angry, or even that we *should* be angry
And again, that's because God is perfectly and surely angry for us
Which gives us the ability to release our imperfect anger into his hands
So let's not confuse ourselves with God here...
Let's not buy the lie that we ought to be offended and outraged all the time
And let's be very slow to justify our anger as righteous... Because we aren't Jesus

[tr] So how do we ensure we use our anger in productive, rather than destructive, ways?
One key is to separate the impulse from the response—the emotion from the reaction
It's not bad to feel anger rise up, when there's something legitimately wrong taking place
And it can even be helpful, if we use it to examine our hearts or evaluate the situation
But while our anger may be a good diagnostic tool, it tends to be a terrible treatment tool
It can be good for identifying problems, but it's not good for solving them⁷
Angiograms themselves can't prevent a heart attack or cure you from one
Or to use another image, anger can be like the 'check engine' light on a car's dashboard

But just like an X-ray can't fix your body, a check engine light can't fix your car
It alerts you that there is an issue, and it may even pinpoint the problem
But you need different tools in order to make the repair

And we often need different tools or strategies to address the wrongs that anger signals
Thus, while angry emotions are right when our cares align with God's cares,

Angry expressions are almost always unhelpful—and wrong

[r] When we move from emotion to expression, it's hardly ever actually useful, and often wrong
[r] Human angry expressions are almost always unhelpful—and wrong

I don't just get this from the much larger number of cases of destructive anger in Scripture
You're already in Ephesians 4... Check out what it says, shortly after, "*Be angry and do not sin*":

READ 4:31-32⁸... So how much anger are we supposed to get rid of? ALL of it

I don't believe he is telling us to get rid of sinless anger

Otherwise he would immediately contradict and cancel out v.26

But he is telling us we've got a big problem, with all kinds of angry expressions

And these expressions almost always cross the line into sin

Sins like bitterness, fighting, and slander

Or consider James 1 again, right after saying we should be slow to anger, James tells us why:

"...for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God." (James 1:20)

Do you get it? This world is full of unrighteousness... We're upset by that and want to fix it

So we think our raging against the machine is going to fix things—to make things better

James bursts our bubbles and says: Your anger is *not* going to produce righteousness

It doesn't make our own hearts righteous

And it won't make anyone around us righteous, either

Human anger doesn't change anyone for the better, for good

By the way, parents, remember this when it comes to raising your kids!

And everyone, remember this when it comes to expressing outrage online! Even with politics!

I'm really setting Pastor Kenny up to hammer this home next week

He will go much deeper on the uselessness, and even devastation, of our anger

My point now is to make the distinction between helpful emotion and unhelpful expression

Because our anger, even if it starts out good, so easily goes bad

Let me put it this way: There may be such a thing as righteous anger

But there is no such thing as righteous hate... No such thing as righteous abuse...

No such thing as righteous irritation... No such thing as righteous threatening...

No such thing as righteous grumbling... No such thing as righteous quarrelling...

No such thing as righteous rudeness... No such thing as righteous rage...

No such thing as righteous resentment... No such thing as righteous unkindness...

No such thing as righteous cruelty... No such thing as righteous hostility...

No such thing as righteous insults... No such thing as righteous revenge...

No such thing as righteous brooding... No such thing as righteous offence

While *in theory* our anger can be constructive, it most often comes out destructive

Even when we're right to be bothered, our anger still gets out of line

As David Powlison sums up so well: *“Anger flares too quickly, alienates too many relationships, burns too long, causes too much pain, hides too well, and feels too good.”*

[tr] So if our anger is generally helpful to signal wrongs, but not to right wrongs,

What *are* actually helpful responses?

What should our anger turn into, if we don’t want to express it sinfully?

That’s what I want to cover on our final point for today

Again, I won’t go into depth on this, as it will be covered extensively in coming weeks

But I think we need to take hold of this as hope today, in the midst of our anger... That:

We can choose to react redemptively to angering things

[r] By the power of the Spirit, believers can react differently

[r] We can choose to react redemptively (and mercifully) to angering things

Please TURN over to **Luke 6** with me [page #862]

This is how Jesus wants us to treat people who’d normally make us crash out:

READ 6:27-31, 35-36⁹... These are clearly angering situations with maddening people

But notably, Jesus doesn’t say: “Be angry, even as your Father is angry.”

Even though he is! ...He tells us to imitate God’s mercy: **READ 6:36¹⁰**

Romans 12 says similar, telling us to never seek to get even, but instead live peaceably,

leave room from the wrath of God to judge, and in the meantime, kill them with kindness:

“To the contrary, “if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.” Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” (Romans 12:20-21)

In James 4, instead of angrily fighting over our passions, we’re to humble ourselves and repent

And in Ephesians 4, once we put away our anger, we’re to be kind, tender-hearted, and forgiving

Are you seeing a pattern? Every passage that corrects our sinful and unhelpful anger

Also gives us an alternative course of action we can take

And none of them minimize evil, or act like angering things don’t exist...

None of them tell us to just buck up and be happy...

No, things are wrong in our world! It’s right to be upset and displeased with them

We can disagree... We’re still meant to rebuke, correct, confront, and warn others

But our motives are different now... Our intentions are transformed

And the way we express our displeasure begins to look more and more like Jesus

This is what David Powlison calls *“The constructive displeasure of mercy”*

He explains: *“Mercy intervenes to address and solve whatever problem is in view... Like simple anger, it says, “That matters. It’s wrong and offensive. I want to do something about it.” But unlike just getting mad, it says, “That’s wrong—and I will be constructively merciful in pursuing whatever is just, whatever makes things right, whatever does good.”... Mercy doesn’t stand idly by while others go in the wrong direction or when someone—oneself or another—is being mistreated. Mercy wades into difficult situations and is willing to get involved. It’s willing to raise difficult issues, apply justice (when needed), and persevere to see good come out of evil.”*

So... Showing patience to someone you want to throttle is a form of mercy

Offering forgiveness to someone who’s wronged you is a form of mercy

Grieving sin and suffering, while not avenging it, is mercy
Overlooking offenses or choosing to endure through them is mercy
Holding back your wrath and instead responding with a gentle word is mercy
Choosing to intentionally love someone who's acting like an enemy is mercy
Wading into conflict, but in constructive ways—peace-making—is mercy
Praying for someone, instead of plotting against them, is mercy
You can do *all* of these things while still expressing your disapproval or displeasure of wrong
By nature, every single one of those things acknowledges wrong has been done,
But it chooses a different, redemptive path, instead of the simple reactive one

Also realize that all the passages we've read treat this kind of behaviour as totally realistic
We *can* live this way... We *can* respond differently... We *can* react redemptively
How? Well, one last passage to TURN to for today: **Galatians 5 [page #975]**
In v.19, Paul lists out sinful 'works of the flesh'...
Notice how many of these are at least semi-related to anger: **READ 5:19-21¹¹**
But that's not who believers in Christ are anymore! **READ 5:22-24¹²**
Christians are Spirit-filled, Spirit-empowered people...
And that makes it possible to respond to angering things with love
We can be patient... We can choose to be kind... We can be gentle... Self-controlled!

And even when we're tempted to react in sinful anger, which will still happen regularly,
There is now always a way of escape for us... We can endure... We can be merciful

CONCLUSION

And ultimately, we can do this because God in Christ has already done this very thing for us
This is how God reacted to us... We angered him, but he redeemed us
We raged against him, but his wrath fell instead on his perfect Son on the cross
We fully deserve to die, but he offers us new life, because Jesus is alive again
He was and is unbelievably patient with us, not wanting any of us to perish
He grieved sin and suffering and death, and then suffered and died for sin
He endured our hatred and hostility, and responded with gentleness and kindness
He waded into our strife and made peace by the blood of his cross
He prayed—and prays—for us... So that we will be empowered to follow him
And he offers us forgiveness, if we will just repent and believe in him, even now
And once we are forgiven, we then are called to forgive as he forgave us
God is kind and merciful to the ungrateful and the evil... That includes you and me
And then he transforms our hearts, so we can be merciful too... May this be true of us

PRAY

Benediction: prayer, 5min,

¹ What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel.

² HT Ed Welch

³ HT David Powlison

⁴ HT Brant Hansen

⁵ Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil.

⁶ Be angry and do not sin

⁷ HT Scott Turansky & Joanne Miller

⁸ Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.

⁹ “But I say to you who hear, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. To one who strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also, and from one who takes away your cloak do not withhold your tunic either. Give to everyone who begs from you, and from one who takes away your goods do not demand them back. And as you wish that others would do to you, do so to them... But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return, and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, for he is kind to the ungrateful and the evil. Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful.

¹⁰ Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful.

¹¹ Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

¹² But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.