

“Do You Have an Anger Problem?”

James 4:1-10

July 28, 2019

INTRODUCTION:

The two love qualities we are looking at today in our summer-long study of 1 Corinthians 13 both deal with anger. It makes sense that anger would be introduced at this point in the text, because Paul has just said that love does not seek itself, and anger stems from a proud, self-centered life. The actual language here says that love is not irritable. That word means to become provoked or to be aroused to anger. Resentment, the next sin that love opposes, is simply anger carried into the future and held on to.

Do you have an anger problem? Such problems are sometimes very easy to see. I remember riding my bike one Saturday in a group ride when we encountered a man with an anger problem. We were riding on the shoulder of a wide, four lane road, completely out of any lane of traffic. A man passed us going the opposite direction, at least five lanes from us. He rolled down his window, stuck his head out and yelled as loud as he could, “Get off the road!” I remember remarking to one of my fellow cyclists, “Let’s pray none of our daughters marries someone like that.”

Is it only those guilty of such overt, angry outbursts who have an anger problem? I think not. I agree with David Powlison in his book *Good and Angry*. Chapter two of the book is titled, “Do You Have a Serious Problem with Anger?” It is the shortest chapter of the book because it consists of only one word: “Yes.” Could that be true? Do we all have a serious problem with anger, a problem that brings harm to those closest to us? I think he’s right, that we all do have a serious problem with anger. Remember that anger is not expressed just in loud verbal outbursts or violent actions. In his devotional on Proverbs, Tim Keller said it like this.

But we should not imagine that a hot-tempered person is necessarily always someone who is melting down in rage. There is a kind of Christian who is habitually abrasive, critical, and ungenerous in dealing with people. They are seldom affirming and usually undiplomatic. They are prone to harsh language and cutting humor and they bristle easily when contradicted. What is behind all this unattractive behavior? It is an undercurrent of anger, like a hidden underground stream rather than a visible one on the surface that noisily rushes over stones.

One of the best explanations of anger in the Bible is found in the passage we are going to be looking at today. James has some very practical wisdom to share with us about this. In our angry age, filled with political, social, racial and economic anger, we need to hear this wisdom.

I. Anger's Source – v. 1-4

Before any problem can be solved, it is necessary to understand the cause of the problem. James tells us plainly where anger comes from. **“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”** (4:1-2). Anger comes when you don't get what you want. Instead of surrendering to God and receiving his gift of contentment in what he chooses to give you, you hold on to that desire and start blaming others. An angry person does not say, “Your kingdom come, your will be done.” He says, “My will be done, and may all who stand in the way of my will be damned.”

Anger is preoccupied with self. The angry person makes several assumptions that are dominated by the proud assertion of self. For one thing, angry people assume that they always know best. Their assumption that they are always right is an unexamined assumption. They never think, “I might be wrong.” So if anyone differs with them, surely the other person must be wrong. Angry people also assume that others exist to serve them. So if another driver of a car does something to delay them, a quick response of anger arises in their heart. “How dare this driver do something that delays me even two seconds!”

Anger damages relationships. James mentions the ultimate damage of murder. Murder starts with anger. Murderers are angry people. Thankfully, the damage is not always that severe. Sometimes it is fighting and quarreling. **“You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel”** (4:2). The damage can be even more subtle than that. Sometimes we make others pay simply by denying them our presence and personal friendship. There is a phrase that we sometimes use to describe anger. We speak of a flare up of anger as “flying off the handle.” The metaphor is that of a loose ax head flying off the ax handle. A three-pound piece of sharpened steel flying through the air has the potential to do a great deal of damage. Anger is like that. In a moment of passion, the missile is released, with the ensuing damage being regretted when the passion of the moment is replaced with a more sober attitude.

Consider the anger that is oftentimes present in a troubled marriage. In his book, *Each for the Other*, Bryan Chapell describes an angry marriage he encountered years ago when he and his wife were living in an apartment with paper-thin walls and floors. A minister's family lived in the apartment below them, and the husband and wife often fought with one another about who was the better witness. Bryan and his wife would try to ignore the shouts of the argument until it would erupt into violence. Then they would try to find some way to intervene in order to stop the violence. Sometimes they would simply drop a book on the floor to remind the couple that they were home and could

hear what was going on. At other times, they would knock on the door to borrow a cup of sugar at an odd time. Occasionally, they even had to call the police. Over time, he noticed a theme developing in their almost daily fights. The husband would begin the fight as a result of some irritation with something his wife or children had done. After shouting his disapproval, the wife would respond by criticizing him for some shortcoming in his life. She was retaliating through trying to shame him in some way, even though she knew that her shaming words would more than likely escalate the conflict. This couple is an illustration of James 4:1-2, with both attempting to control the other. The husband would attempt to dominate the woman with his strength and she was trying to control her husband with shame. Neither was getting what they wanted, and both were responding with control and anger.

James goes further in explaining the source of anger by pointing out its spiritual roots. The angry person is prayerless. **“You do not have, because you do not ask”** (v. 2). Or if they do manage to pray, their motives are completely self-centered. This angry person is still saying, “My will be done,” and prayer is employed to enlist God’s help in that enterprise. James speaks roughly to these angry people, calling them **“adulterous people.”** He has rebuked sin repeatedly throughout this letter, but he has always referred to his readers with the friendly term “my brothers.” The last thing these angry people need is the conviction that God might be on their side. On the contrary, as they assert their self-will, they have put themselves so strongly against God that they have become enemies. **“Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God”** (4:4).

This brings up an application before we move on to talk about the solution to anger. Anger will not be solved without addressing the vertical dimension of one’s relationship to God. Oftentimes, people attempt to control anger by mere horizontal solutions. The advice given here is not wrong *in* itself, but it is wrong *by* itself. For example, people are told, “Count to ten before voicing anger.” Or they might be advised to express their anger toward an inanimate object such as a pillow instead of a person. People are counseled to watch their body language or to express their desires in non-condemning and non-judgmental ways. People are encouraged to practice good patterns of communication, for example listening well and repeating back what has been heard. That’s all good advice as far as it goes, but frankly it is like the proverbial bringing of a knife to a gun fight. Anger is fundamentally a theological matter that must be addressed at that level. Let’s look at how James does that.

II. Anger’s Solution – v. 5-10

The biggest need the angry person has is not for a change in other people. That’s what angry people always believe. “If this person would only change and

do what I want them to do, then everything would be better.” But that is a false belief. The biggest need they have is for a change in their own attitude, and it needs to start with a change in their attitude about God. That’s where James begins in verse 5. **“Or do you suppose it is to no purpose that the Scripture says, ‘He yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us’?”** James views God as angry, like a jealous lover whose spouse has been threatened. This brings up an important point about anger. It is not always bad. The word used in 1 Corinthians 13 that is translated “irritable” in our text is used only one other time in the New Testament, and it carries a positive sense there. In Acts 17:16, we read that Paul’s spirit was provoked upon seeing the idolatry of Athens. God shows anger on occasion, as does Jesus. The Bible commands us to **“Be angry and do not sin”** (Eph. 4:26). This leads to a better understanding of what anger is. It should be understood as “energy released to defend something you love” (Keller in Proverbs, p. 120). Sinful anger is when we love the wrong thing, our own will. James wants us to remember that God’s anger is released against the things that are opposed to us. He is like a husband who loves his wife and is jealous for her affections. How would you husbands respond to a man who started calling your wife and trying to pursue her love and steal it from you? His actions would be met with anger and the strongest opposition possible. God is like that toward us.

Verse 6 continues along these same lines when it says, **“But he gives more grace.”** More than what? He gives more than is needed. Do you ever feel like you’ve used up your quota of mess-ups with God? Surely, you think, he must be getting weary of hearing from me about the mess of my life. We need to hear God’s word through James. **“He gives more grace.”** I read a few years ago about an artist who submitted a painting of Niagara Falls for an exhibition, but he neglected to give his work a title. So the gallery decided to supply the title themselves. They called the painting “More to Come.” God’s grace is like the water flowing over Niagara Falls, in that there is always more to come, in spite of the fact that a large amount has already come.

Once we are armed with this conviction that God is untiringly for us, we are ready to take the next step in dealing with our anger. It is found in repentance, spoken of by James in terms of pride and humility. **“God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.”** And what is it we are to repent of? The next sentence gets to that. **“Submit yourselves therefore to God”** (4:7). Anger comes from the kind of pride that thinks I know best how to run my life. When I don’t get what I want, I respond in anger, never stopping to think that perhaps what I want is not what I need. Let me give a simple illustration. Imagine yourself experiencing a little flare up of anger while driving your car, and you are delayed by some bad driving on the part of another driver. For example, the behavior that is likely to provoke my anger is when a driver in front of me isn’t paying attention to the light which just turned green, often because they are looking at a smartphone. By the time they notice the green light, there is just enough time for them to get through the light, but not me.

Have you ever had the thought, if something like that has happened to you, that perhaps such a delay might have saved you from some accident down the road? You can't know such a thing, but God does. So we submit to God both in his commands to us in the Bible and in his providential ruling of our lives. In order to submit to God like this, we must believe two things. First, God is for me, and second, God knows better than I. Believing that goes a long way toward diminishing our anger.

The next two commands should be taken together. We resist the devil and we draw near to God. The walk of humility requires us to fight the devil and his desires for us. What are his desires? They are the same as his desires for Jesus at the temptation. He wanted Jesus to take control of his own life rather than submit to God. Satan wanted Jesus to embrace power instead of weakness. We are called to fight that. And then we draw near to God, which speaks of coming to him in prayer and by faith. I believe we are called to do this multiple times throughout the day. When we are tempted to anger, it is a call to resist the devil's efforts to get us to take control of our lives and instead to draw near to God and trust him. How would your life be different if every flare up of anger were received as a call from God to draw near to him and submit to him as your Father who loves you and who rules your life for good? In a word, such a life would be one of joy and contentment.

Then we are told to cleanse our hands and purify our hearts. Someone might object and say, but isn't it the case that only God can do that? I put this in the same category as Jesus commanding Lazarus to come forth. Isn't it the case that only God can raise the dead? Of course, but he also commands Lazarus to get up and walk. So when we are told here to cleanse our hands and heart, we need to remember that the power for doing so belongs only to God. But in his command he gives the power. Is there an area of your life where some cleansing is needed? Perhaps it's a problem of dirty hands, which speaks of our outward behavior, something like sins of the tongue or your use of money. We are far more prone to anger if we are living with a guilty conscience. The anger comes because we want to be right and look good, and any threat to that provokes our anger. But the only way to cleanse the conscience is through this process of humbling oneself through repentance and experiencing the lifting up God promises as he forgives and cleanses.

CONCLUSION:

As we've seen, anger is releasing energy to defend something you love. May God strengthen you to release your energy against the problem facing those you love, not against the person you are called to love!