

# *Now is the Time for Love*

## *Love is not Easily Angered*

### *Confronting the Sin of Anger*

1 Corinthians 13:5-6

Sunday, February 20, 2005

We live in an angry world. During the past week I listened to two reports on National Public Radio about the need to control anger:

- In our nation's capitol the level of anger and contempt between Democrats and Republicans has reached an all-time high and the level of civility has reached an all-time low.
- The NBA has just adopted a new set of rules to prevent players and fans from getting into fist fights.

Anger is in the air. In sharp contrast, the Bible tells us, "Love is not easily angered" (or love is not easily provoked) and it does not "take into account a wrong suffered." The only other time this specific Greek word is used in the NT is in the Book of Acts 17:16. The Apostle Paul entered the city of Athens a place called Mars Hill. As he walked through the city he noticed idols everywhere – statues devoted to this god and that god. His spirit was "provoked." He was irritated and appalled by what he saw. At that point Paul had to decide how to channel his anger. Would he use it build up or tear down? Paul chose the redemptive route. He engaged in dialogue (see verses 17-18 - they even insult him but rather than provoke him to respond with anger, he practiced civility and winsomeness – see verses 22-23).

**The Normalcy of Anger.** Notice it says that "love is not easily angered;" it doesn't say "never get angry" or "anger is always bad so stop it!" In another passage, Paul tell us to "Be angry, but do not sin" (Ephesians 4:26). The Bible contains a realistic and humane description of our humanity. On a biochemical, psychological and spiritual level it's impossible to avoid anger altogether.

Anger is a normal part of life. On a biochemical level, anger's quick rush of adrenaline tells us that boundaries are being violated – either yours or someone else. Something you hold dear is threatened. It's like the red light that says "Check engine." You can keep driving, you can try to ignore it, but it won't go away. It has a vital function in our lives. The real issue is how we respond to anger. Anger can become redemptive or destructive; it can build up or tear down; create life or add to our culture of death.

**Redemptive Anger.** Anger can be channeled into redemptive purposes. It happens all the time. For example, on April 12, 1963 a group of eight respected white clergyman wrote a letter appealing to Martin Luther King, Jr. and other black leaders to remain calm and take all their grievances to the courts rather than the streets. Basically, the letter was a nice way to say, "Just simmer down, boy." From his prison cell Martin Luther King, Jr. responded with his famous "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," a masterful example of righteous, redemptive anger. I urge you to read the entire letter; let me read a few quotes:

"In the midst of blatant injustices inflicted upon the Negro people, I have watched white churchmen (he's referring to the eight respected clergyman) stand on the sideline and mouth pious irrelevancies and sanctimonious trivialities. In the midst of a mighty struggle to rid our nation of racial and economic injustice, I have heard ministers say, 'Those are social issues, with the Gospel has no real concern.' And I have watched churches commit themselves to a completely other worldly religion...Is organized religion too inextricably bound to the status quo to save our nation and the world?"

Of course, more than anyone, Jesus Christ, who was not an angry person, channeled his anger into redemptive purposes. Turn with me to Mark chapter 3 on page --. The religious system of Jesus' day did not offer real healing to broken people. Instead, the system and rules kept people bound in sin and brokenness. When Jesus announced that "the Kingdom of God is here" (Mark 1:14-15) he meant that the saving, healing and restoring reign of God had come and was coming in His person - his work, his life and death and resurrection. The religious leaders watched warily, hoping to spot Jesus violating the rules so they could nail him. "After looking around at them with anger..." How did Mark know Jesus was angry? He could see it on his face. Jesus is ticked off, incensed, hot under the collar. This is not right. This is righteous anger and its purpose is to set people free. And yet, look at the next phrase: Jesus is not just angry; he's also sad – "grieved at their hardness of heart." Redemptive anger usually works that way: we're sad and angry at the same time. You see something and it breaks your heart and you pound your fist and say "this must not happen anymore" and it makes you weep.

**Destructive Anger.** Then there is destructive anger, anger that tears down. The Latin word for anger derives from the words for choking or strangling. That's the way we feel when destructive anger takes over. There are two words for anger in the New Testament: (1) thumos = like flame on dry straw – bursts quickly and then its gone – provoked, irritated quickly, respond like a shotgun blast → images for anger: blazing, flaming, scorching, simmering, boiling; (2) oge = long-lived anger that simmers, stews, broods, lingers.

Thumos anger is like a grease fire which suddenly bursts into flame and burns uncontrollably. Oge anger is like a pot of soup which you place on the back burner as it bubbles and simmers for endless hours. We can see how both forms of anger work in tandem → "road rage" which is an explosion, an outburst, a burst, flash of anger, but it's also connected with a long-lived, simmering anger. Most of us are carrying a surplus of anger in our systems and perhaps we're even addicted to the adrenaline rush of anger and we miss it when it's gone. No wonder the Apostle Paul called anger one of the "works of the flesh" (Gal. 5:19).

**The problem with anger: it grows.** See Matthew 5:22ff. Carrying anger towards your brother leads to contempt. See Matthew 5:22. Raca = contempt for someone. The word itself may have originated from the sound you make when you collect mucus from the back of your throat (yes, it is gross). In anger I want to hurt you, get even or nurse a grudge against you. But as anger blossoms into contempt, I cease to care about you at all. You are not worth consideration. The labels of contempt are forever changing. In my

day, for instance, they included words like “nigger, twit, dweeb, dork, nerd, and loser.” Those are the nice words. Once I move into contempt, I can ignore, exclude or even hurt you, but it doesn’t matter because you don’t matter. Sometimes families move into contempt. Sometimes racial or ethnic groups move into contempt. Sometimes men hold women in contempt = misogyny = women don’t matter. Sometimes churches move into contempt → we exclude people and set up a private country club for church people and people who can qualify for our club. Contempt justifies the initial anger and gives it lasting power.

If we can’t let anger go, according to the Bible, we develop a “root of bitterness” (Hebrews 12:12). If we refuse to lay it aside and place it at the foot of the cross, we become an angry person, moving through life with a hard edge or a sweet exterior that masks the internal anger, perhaps even the anger turned against ourselves that leads to all kinds of physical and emotional and relational breakdowns. In terms of our relationship with God, our anger and bitterness constricts our ability to enter into the joy of God’s kingdom. See Luke 15:28 - “and he (the older brother) was angry and would not go in.”

**Laying aside our anger.** How do we handle our anger? How do we transform destructive anger into redemptive anger? The Bible is straightforward: “Lay it aside” Colossians 3:8. But how do we do that? Most of us have spent our entire lives or grown up in families that had all kinds of unhealthy ways to deal with our anger:

How do we practice healthy, redemptive anger that actually strengthens the life of a community and builds stronger relationships?

- **Bring it to the cross.** It can be terrifying to face our sin – our envy, our pride and now our anger. When Christians say, “Bring it to the cross” what does that mean? It means we have a God who has seen and experienced the very worst that humanity has to offer, taken it upon himself, identified with it, paid the debt for it, cleansed it, and died the death that we should have died. See 2 Corinthians 5:21. Imagine every angry thought and every angry word; imagine the anger that is floating in your system right now, going out of your body into the body of Jesus as he died on the cross for your sins. He absorbed it in his body.
- **Bring your anger into the light.** We said it’s like the “Check Engine” light on your dashboard. Underlying anger you will often find other issues under the hood. Open the hood and look. The Bible calls this confession (1 John 1:7-8 and James 5:16). When we confess we open the hood and bring our anger into the light of God’s presence. Perhaps we discover that under our anger, we have a great deal of fear - fear of being discounted, fear of rejection, fear of not being in control, fear of losing something. Pay attention to the fear. Underlying fear there is often a lack of trust – i.e. the thing you fear has become bigger than the presence of God in your life. The Bible calls that idolatry. Or our anger may stem from pride. In my rage, I often imagine slights and injuries when there are none. In my vanity and arrogance I say, “Who do they think they are to ignore me?” In a marriage, one spouse may say, “Who does she think she is to not take care of my needs?” The root of our anger is our vanity and our wounded ego.

Our anger stems from our pettiness. I need praise or comfort or I need to be right or look good or be in control or preserve my image – and you thwarted those goals, you cut me off, you put me down, you didn't notice me or you didn't flatter me. Or perhaps your anger stems from deep wounds: perhaps as a child you were abused, belittled, ignored, or deprived. Until we learn to fill our heart with God's love, those experiences leave a hole, a hole that can easily be filled with anger.

The important thing is this: bring your anger into the light. Open up the hood and look – ask God to help you look. Be brutally honest about your anger. There are reasons for your anger. You cannot possibly do this until we're confident of #1 – bring it to the cross. See quotes from Benner. (My time of anger – heading for a lake, pile of rocks, started throwing them into the lake as hard as I could, anger pouring out of me – where is all of this coming from?). I entered a season of confessing and cleansing from anger, looking under the hood and going to the root of bitterness in my heart. But that's impossible without a clear sense of being loved, a clear understanding of “justification by faith” (Romans 8:1).

- **Deal with it directly** – If you're angry with a specific person, there's only one way to deal with it in Christian community. Matthew 18:15 – go to your brother or sister directly and work it out. Do you realize how radical this is – or at least how radical it should be? Because you know that God has dealt with your sin and your anger → you go to the person. And in works in both directions: if a brother or sister is angry at you, then you need to drop everything (even if right in the middle of your prayer time) and go directly to your brother and sister and ask for forgiveness. This two way movement of dealing directly with our anger leads to a profound principle of our life in Christ: ***God wants us to radically pursue one another.*** It's so easy to cut someone off, to avoid someone, to get angry and never work it through, to move into contempt. The Bible calls us to a life of radical pursuit. Glossing over differences isn't fellowship; it's polite pretending. We pursue one another's heart. Radical pursuit.
- **Practice Forgiveness** → love “does not take into account a wrong” (1 Corinthians 13:5). The problem is that anger feels so energizing; we get addicted to the rush of anger. Forgiveness does not offer the adrenaline rush of anger. Anger feels like power; it's like an electrical shock running through your body. Angry people are unhappy, but at least they know that they're alive. Forgiveness “is a quiet revolution, as easy to miss as a fist uncurling to become an open hand” (Barbara Brown Taylor). But as we look at the cross, as we realize that I have done so much in my life – I have done so much every single day of my life – to provoke and irritate a holy God, and yet at the cross, God removed it, forgave it, canceled the list of charges against us by nailing it to the cross (Colossians 2:13-15), as I realize that and accept the good news of the Gospel, forgiveness becomes a way of life. It becomes a habit, a daily habit as regular as brushing my teeth. More than once day I will let go of what irritates me and provokes me.

**Conclusion:** Are you carrying anger in your system? In a relationship? Perhaps someone wounded you and you're still carrying a toxic level of anger in your system. Perhaps in a marriage or a friendship. Perhaps you're angry because someone disappointed you – or perpetually disappoints you? Is the red “check engine” light on in your soul? Have you allowed God to search your heart and then have you brought it into the light? Perhaps there is someone you need to speak to – directly and gently about your anger. Do it. Perhaps there is someone you've wounded. Go to that person and talk to him or her. Ask forgiveness. We hurt and disappoint and wound one another; it happens all the time. Expect it. But then deal with it. Expect to ask for forgiveness. Make it normal. Expect to confess your sins to one another. Look under the hood. Confess it to God. Lay it down at the foot of the cross. Receive forgiveness.

## Communion Meditation

In one deeply moving story, Abba Abraham, a desert father known for his great holiness, received word that his seven-year old niece had become an orphan. Abraham gladly welcomed her to his desert hut, allowing her to stay in the outer room of his cell. As Mary matured, she became a young woman of great beauty. But one day a wicked monk visited and, enraptured with Mary's beauty, raped her. Mary, tortured by guilt and despair, fled to a distant city where she found a job in a brothel. Abraham returned from his journey and looked everywhere for Mary. After searching for two years, he finally put the pieces together and located Mary. In the spirit of Jesus, Abraham put aside his monk's garb and, borrowing a military uniform and even a horse, he fled the desert to pursue Mary in the city.

When he finally found the brothel, still disguised as a powerful soldier, Abraham demanded to see the "fine wench" named Mary. "I've come a long way for the love of Mary," he told the innkeeper. And then the desert ascetic, who had subsisted on bread and water for nearly forty years, devoured a chunk of red meat. After supper, Mary took the "officer" to her room. As she bent down to untie his shoes, her uncle quietly repeated, "Yes, I've come a long way for the love of Mary." Mary recognized her uncle's voice and fell at his feet weeping. Because of his devotion to Jesus and "for the love of Mary," Abba Abraham fled the ghetto walls and pursued a ragged sinner. And if her uncle could pursue a ragged person like Mary, how much more could Mary expect from the God who is "rich in mercy" (Ephesians 2:4).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from Belden Lane, **The Solace of Fierce Landscapes** (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), page 176.