

Introduction

Today, I'm going to address one of the most hellish of all human responses and I'm not speaking profanely. I'm speaking literally. For one thing, this response will be one of the two defining characteristics of human society in hell. For another thing, it creates the dynamics of hell right now. We do see glimpses of heaven and hell in human life on earth and this response is one of the glimpses of hell. You all know to what I'm referring. It's anger. There's hell to pay when others and we get angry and that's what I'm going to preach about today.

Anger That Isn't Sinful

In verses 22-24, Paul calls us to do two things. On the negative side, lay aside the old self. The old self is the one that thinks, feels, wills, and acts as the sinful nature in us directs. On the positive side, put on the new self. The new self is the one that thinks, feels, will, and acts as the Holy Spirit in us directs. Paul's call then is this. Turn from the old self and to the new one.

We need to do that, he goes on to say in verses 26-27, when it comes to anger. Psychologist Charles Spielberger defines anger well. It's **"an emotional state that varies in intensity from mild irritation to intense fury and rage."** That's anger and notice what Paul exhorts us to do with regard to it, **"Be angry and sin not."** That exhortation of his implies something. Some kinds of anger aren't sinful and that's true.

First, anger isn't sinful as an initial spontaneous response. It's like pain. Pain is an initial spontaneous physical response that alerts us to danger. It tells us our finger is on a hot surface and is going to be burned if we don't take it away. In a similar way, anger as an initial spontaneous emotional response alerts us to an injustice or the obstruction of our will. It raises immediate resistance or alarm and tells us we need to act. It then immediately passes.

An English teacher gave my son's class an assignment. Write about

an American hero. Some of her students chose drug addicted rock stars and she allowed that. But my son Moses chose Ollie North and she didn't allow that. **"He's a criminal, not a hero,"** she said. Moses came home and told me what happened and I became angry. The anger rose and alerted me to the injustice. It then immediately passed. It wasn't sinful.

There is a second kind of anger that isn't sinful. It's **"righteous indignation."** Jesus felt that. Mark 3:5, for instance, says, **"After looking around them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart."** That verse teaches us three things about righteous indignation. First, it lingers, but only as long as is necessary to address the injustice that gave rise to it. Second, it's emptied of all self-interest. It directed to injustice alone. And third, it's emptied of all malice. It wills no one any harm. If anger lingers longer than is necessary or is laced with self-interest or malice, no matter how slight, it isn't righteous indignation.

We see then that it's possible to be angry and sin not. Anger isn't sinful when it's an initial spontaneous response (immediately passes) or when it's righteous indignation (emptied of all self-interest and malice).

Anger That Is Sinful

But let's face it. The anger that we see in the world around us, that of others and our own, is rarely either of those. It's almost always the sinful kind instead that Jesus Himself condemns in Matthew 5:21-22. This anger that characterizes our world is sinful for two essential reasons.

First, it's egocentric. Its source is our self-interest and pride. Stop for a moment and think about the last time you got angry. What caused you to? I can tell you. It's the same thing that's causes all of us to – the obstruction of our will. People or things thwart our wishes. We want to do or to have this and some person or thing keeps us from doing or having it. So, we get angry. Or we don't want to do or to have this and some person or thing compels us to do or have it. So, we get angry.

Think about how egocentric or self-centered that is. It assumes our desires and concerns are more important than everyone else's, including

the one with whom we're angry. It also assumes we shouldn't be subjected to the frustrations, inconveniences, and annoyances of life to which everyone else is subjected. It's as if we're the center of the universe around which every person and thing has to revolve.

An acquaintance of mine ordered a Whopper minus the mayonnaise, to go. But when he got home and opened it, it had mayonnaise. So, he got angry and called the people at Burger King something I can't repeat. How many of you have ever gotten a take out order from a fast food restaurant that was wrong? All of us have, probably multiple times. It's just a fact of life, from which he thinks he should somehow be exempted. Apart from the bad language he used, his anger was egocentric (prideful) and thus sinful.

The anger that characterizes our world is sinful for a second reason. It's almost always laced with one degree or another of malice. It almost always includes a will to harm the person who made us angry, or at least the beginnings thereof. How many times have you heard a person say about someone he or she is mad at, "**I could just smack him.**" We take that lightly but it's actually quite instructive. It reveals that every degree of anger contains some degree of malice.

I once got angry when I heard a mother demean her little son at the Gabriels store. I can't even repeat what she called him because it's so vulgar. Anyway, I was still feeling anger when I left the store. But it wasn't the anger Jesus felt in Mark 3:5. His was laced with grief. Mine was laced with malice. I felt like "**smacking**" that mother.

I'd sum it up this way. Like all of you, I've been angry hundreds of times in my life. But not once that I can think of was it righteous indignation. My point is this. Almost all of the anger we see in the world around us, that of others and our own, is egocentric and laced with malice. It's the sinful kind that Jesus and Paul call us to lay aside.

Hell to Pay

There will be hell to pay if we don't. Again, I'm not speaking

profanely. I'm speaking literally. Notice verse 27, which is frightful. You and I getting angry gives the devil an opportunity, or as one version translates it, "**a chance.**" It opens up our personalities and circumstances to him and his work. It gives him a chance and believe me, he'll take it. He'll bring the very dynamics of hell itself into the persons and lives of everyone involved, including us. Let's consider those dynamics by considering the consequences of our anger.

First, it passively wounds the people to whom it's directed. Remember what I said. Every degree of anger contains some degree of malice. Everyone knows that. That's why anger, in its own right, not acted out, is an injury to the recipients of it. When they discover that we're angry with them, they're already wounded. Our anger alone, not acted out, will likely stop their behavior or change it.

Second, our anger actively wounds the people to whom it's directed. It's an established fact that we usually express our anger. It compels us to say or do things and so we say or do them. We scream, hit, slander, argue, blow our horns, give the cold shoulder, boycott, and much more. We act, in other words, to inflict some kind of harm on the ones with whom we're angry.

Third, our anger wounds innocent bystanders. Dallas Willard calls what I'm talking about "**secondhand anger.**" It can harm the life, health, and happiness of those to whom it isn't directed. The anger of parents to each other, for instance, can shrivel the souls of their children. Or the anger of bosses to workers or workers to workers can demoralize the entire office or factory where it occurs. More generally, it always raises the stress levels of those who are around it.

Fourth, our anger evokes anger in return. It normally crosses the wills of those with whom we're angry. It thwarts what they want, which, in turn makes them angry with us. It ends up, to one degree or another, creating the Hatfield's and McCoy's all over again.

And fifth, our anger wounds us. It diminishes personality and life. It can cause us physical, psychological, relational, and financial harm.

Years ago, I asked a young man with a cast on his hand what happened and he candidly told me. He had gotten into an argument with his wife several nights before and ended up sticking his fist through the kitchen wall, breaking his hand and scaring his little son to death.

That is a microcosm of what anger and Satan working in it can do. We talk about **"hell on earth"** and that's what it and he together create. They bring the very dynamics of hell itself into the lives of others and us. That's why Dallas Willard writes, **"But there is nothing that can be done with anger that cannot be better done without it."**

Eliminate Anger

So, let's eliminate anger as a way of dealing with people. I didn't say manage it but eliminate it. Having read what Jesus says about it in Matthew 5:21-22, a friend of mine began talking about **"zero anger."** That's a good way of saying it. That should be our aim, **"zero anger."** Eliminate it completely as a way of reacting or responding to others.

We can do that you know. Paul's exhortations in verses 26-27 assume something. We get angry because we will or choose to. It goes like this. Anger rises initially and spontaneously within us. We then actively receive it and decide to indulge it and do. Absent an organic problem, that's normally why we get angry. It's because we will or choose to. But we have the ability to will or choose not to. We know that anger is sinful and displeases God. We also know that there's hell to pay when we get angry. So, we don't receive and decide to indulge the initial anger we feel. We reject it and decide to wave it off instead.

We see then that anger isn't just an emotional matter. It's a volitional matter as well. It involves the will. We can eliminate it as a factor in our lives if we will or choose to.

We can do that though only in a particular context. That context is engaging God. We engage Him in specific ways, which I've identified and explained: build a vision of Him, practice His presence, muse upon Him, worship Him, ask Him to do or give things, practice solitude and silence,

purposefully obey Him, thank Him, fast, talk to Him, and read the Bible with all of our hearts. Those are the central practices by which we engage God. So we learn how to carry them out and then do just that - routinely carry them out.

Doing that causes us to stand in the reality of God's kingdom and resources, which continually transforms what we are. Our habits of mind, our feeling tones and moods, our habits of body, and our volitional strength become increasingly like those of Jesus.

That in turn enables us to do what Paul says. Be angry and sin not. Emotionally, it diminishes anger as an initial spontaneous response both quantitatively and qualitatively. It rises in us less frequently and less strongly than it used to. Volitionally, it fortifies our will so that it becomes stronger than anger is. As a result of both things, rejecting and waving off anger when it rises in us is an easy thing to do.

Not long ago, I called an 800 number. I told the operator what I needed and she transferred me to a person for whom I had to wait 15 minutes on hold. I finally talked to that person who informed me the operator should have transferred me to someone else. So she transferred me to that someone else for whom I had to wait another 20 minutes on hold. Years ago, anger would have risen spontaneously in me and I would have received and indulged it. I would likely have commented to one of the persons involved, "**This is absurd.**" But this time I didn't. Anger did rise spontaneously in me I admit but only weakly. And my fortified will quickly rejected and waved it off. Why was I able to do that? It's because I'm routinely engaging God.

Conclusion

I saw a bumper sticker at Rogers Flea Market that said: "**I get mad and even.**" It's meant to be funny of course but in reality, that's precisely how many of us live. But always remember this. There's "**hell to pay**" when we do. So, don't! Make it "**zero anger**" instead!