



The Weeds of Anger

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Last week we looked at the sin of anger, but we can't just leave things there – we need to look at the unruly weeds that find fertile soil in our anger. You see, we're prone to thinking of our anger in terms of episodes. We get angry and then we get over it. Sometimes we might apologise to the person whom we were angry at, but sometimes we don't. Either way, both parties typically manage to "get over it" and get on with life. The relationship has been scarred, but not broken. It's not the best way to live with each other, but we tolerate it. That really seems to be the way many Christians view the sin of anger – they just accept it as part of life.

Holy Scripture takes a different approach. It tells us to "put away" our anger and it associates what we might think of as no big deal with other really ugly sins, like bitterness, clamour, wrath, slander, malice, and obscene talk. Anger doesn't keep good company. In Ephesians 4:26, St. Paul writes his familiar words, "Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger." Paul's not saying that it's okay to be angry – he's saying just the opposite: don't sin in your anger. If you're angry, deal with it. Don't hold onto it. Nip it in bud. Don't go to sleep on it – deal with it before the sun goes down. At best anger is sin, and at worst it leads to even greater sins.

Tonight I want to look at some of those long-term sins that grow from the fertile soil of our anger. If we don't deal with these sins, they *will* poison our minds – and worse, they usually end up poisoning the minds of the people around us.

First: resentment. Resentment is what happens when we don't let go of our anger. It's what happens when we internalise or "stuff" our anger. It's what happens when you're treated badly, but don't feel like you're in a position to do anything about it. Think of our examples last week – of the employee with the boss who screams and swears first, then asks questions later; or the wife with the overbearing husband who jumps on everything she does wrong. We need to deal with resentment, because it tends to become entrenched. It's the result of nursing our wounds in an unhealthy and

sinful way that leads us to dwell on our anger.

Second: Bitterness. Bitterness is the next step. It's what happens when our resentment grows into feelings of hatred and animosity. Resentment might dissipate given enough time, but bitterness just continues to grow and fester. The longer we let it go the worse it gets. It's usually the long-term reaction to a real or perceived wrong when our initial anger isn't dealt with.

I think we've all experienced this, at least in other people, who have held onto a past wrong or hurt. People will say, "I forgave her, but I haven't forgotten." Obviously, if that's our attitude, we haven't really forgiven! This sort of thing often seems to happen in our families or even in our church family. Someone feels they haven't been treated right or fairly, but instead of trying to resolve the issue, they allow the hurt to fester and grow into bitterness. But regardless of the hurt or the unfairness, bitterness is never a biblical option. We can be hurt, and we can acknowledge the hurt, but we are never allowed to become bitter.

Third: Enmity. Enmity (or maybe it would better to say *hostility*) describes our ill will or our animosity when it's taken to the next level. We can be bitter, but still treat the object of our bitterness politely and civilly, enmity or hostility is usually expressed openly. We might cut another person down with our speech, make fun of him, or gossip about him just to make sure others esteem him as lowly as we do. And that's the real problem with enmity. Where bitterness is usually something we keep to ourselves, enmity tends to spread to the people around us – we want to make sure everyone knows that so-and-so did us wrong and shares the same level of enmity that we do.

Fourth: grudge. This occurs five times in Scripture and it's telling that two of those times are translated as "hate" by many modern translations: Esau *hated* Jacob and planned to kill him (Gen 27:41) and Joseph's brothers were afraid he would *hate* them and pay them back for all the evil they had done to him (Gen. 50:15).

So we go from resentment, to bitterness, to enmity, to hate – to the point where plans for murder come into play. Granted, it's not likely that any of us would hold a grudge and actually carry out a plot to kill the object of that grudge, but do we get perverse enjoyment from thinking over in our minds what form our revenge might take on the object of our wrath? Do we take pleasure in

dwelling on those fantasies? St. Paul says in Romans 12:19-21,

Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." 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.

Finally: Strife. Strife is what happens when a conflict boils over and it almost always seems to involve groups or parties – it doesn't stay between just two people. That's why we talk about "church fights" or "family feuds." It's always an ugly thing that goes way beyond the bounds of "respectable" sins. It's certainly not subtle, but I think we need to address it because it's a sin that we tolerate. Strife often happens between self-righteous Christians who never consider that their own attitudes or heated words might contribute to the conflict. In their minds, it's always the fault of the other guy.

I think these five sins really make the point that anger tends to escalate if we don't deal with it. If left alone it festers into bitterness, resentment, enmity, and grudges, so it's no wonder that St. Paul strongly warns us, "Don't let the sun set on your anger!" But if we need to deal with our anger, what are the steps we should take. Well, I think there are three basic directions.

First, as I said last week, we need to remember the sovereignty of God. God doesn't cause people to sin, but he does allow it – and always with a purpose. He wants us to grow in Christ-likeness and he can use any and every situation in our lives to do it. Think about Joseph. His bothers threw him in a pit, sold him to slavers, and he ended up in prison. He didn't become bitter. He didn't hold a grudge. No, instead he could say to his brothers, "It was not you who sent me here, but God" (Gen. 45:8).

I've found that firmly believing in the sovereignty of God is my number one first line of defence against the temptation to allow anger to linger in my mind and emotions. If I'm really struggling with the temptation, I bring to mind the specific things that caused my anger and remember that they are under God's sovereign control. Though those actions may be sinful, just as with Joseph, God intends them for my good and for my growth.

Sometimes that good might be to grow to be more like Christ. But sometimes God has

other ends in mind – maybe to prepare us in some way for greater usefulness in the Kingdom. Sometimes we may never be able to figure out what God intended when we were tempted by anger, but it should be enough for us to know God’s promise is always to use all things for our good and for his glory in our lives. Actively reflecting on this great truth of God’s sovereignty is the first step to defusing anger.

Second, we need to pray that God will help us to grow in love. In his first epistle, St. Peter urges us to pursue holiness even when the going is tough. Throughout his epistle he stresses the importance of brotherly love – the love we ought to have toward fellow believers. He writes in 4:8, “Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins.”

Sometimes the offence against us may be so great that we need to deal with it by confronting the person who sinned against us – and if he refuses to confess and repent of it –we need to take the issue before the Church. But St. Peter tells us that “love covers a multitude of sins” as well. The love put in our hearts by the Holy Spirit should be able to overlook the occasional snub, embarrassment, or inconvenience.

When the strong-willed husband comes home and sees the house is still a mess, the kids are dirty, and dinner isn’t ready, he can allow love to cover the situation. In fact, if he really does let love cover it, he’ll not only overlook the temptation to get angry, but he might get the kids in the tub, get out the vacuum cleaner, or put some dinner in the microwave to help out his wife. If he does that, he’s following the example of Jesus, who in full awareness of his deity performed the lowliest of tasks, like washing his disciples dirty and dusty feet.

If the Holy Spirit dwells in us, we should be more prone to respond with love than with anger. That’s really the bottom line. In 1 Corinthians 13, St. Paul tells us that “Love is not easily angered.” We really need to think about that. Are you easily angered? Do little things set you off? Or are you able to let love cover those little things. St. Paul also tells us in that same chapter that “love keeps no record of wrongs.” Do you keep a scorecard for each of the people in your life. If someone asks, can you recite the last twenty things your husband or your wife did to tick you off? The last fifty? More? One wife came to counselling with 420 typed pages of her husband’s wrongs against her. That’s not love! That’s the road to bitterness, resentment, enmity, and strife! To keep no record of wrongs means that we

cease to bring up the wrong to ourselves or the other party. We can’t erase the hurt (that’s God’s job), but we can choose not to feed the anger.

Finally, we need to learn to forgive as God has forgiven us. I think that the most helpful passage of Scripture here is the familiar parable of the unforgiving servant. Peter asked Jesus, “Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?”

In the parable Jesus describes a servant who owed his master, the king, an outrageous debt: ten thousand talents. Jesus is speaking in hyperbole. We’d say that the servant owed his master a gazillion dollars. And so the servant, who could *never* pay the debt back to the king begged for patience and leniency and the king took pity on him and forgave the debt.

So the servant left the king’s palace, but as he was walking down the street, he ran into a fellow servant who owed him a hundred denarii. Again, that’s no small sum – about 1/3 of a year’s wages – but by comparison to the first man’s debt it was practically nothing. The second servant pleaded with patience, but the servant who had just been forgiven his gazillion dollar debt refused and had him thrown into prison.

The message of the parable turns on the huge difference between the two debts: a gazillion dollars and, say, \$10,000-\$15,000. Even the smaller sum is nothing to sniff at, but it’s still significant.

The gazillion dollars represents our moral and spiritual debt to God. If it’s a gazillion, it might as well be an infinite amount. It’s a debt we can never repay no matter how hard we try, no matter how moral or spiritual we are – the debt of our sin is enormous. The damage to God’s glory by our sin is determined not by the severity of our sin, but by the value of God’s glory.

Think of it this way. If I spill ink on the dirty mat by your front door, that’s bad. But if I spill ink on the white, wool, designer carpet in your living room, that’s really bad. Either way, my act is the same, but the value of the two rugs is vastly different. The extent of the damage is determined not by the size of the ink stain on the two rugs, but by the value of each of those rugs.

That’s how we need to see our sin against God. Every sin we commit, regardless of how insignificant it might be to us, is an assault on the infinite glory and holiness of God. And the value of the expensive rug,

even if it’s in the millions, is nothing compared to God’s glory. So we’re all in the same predicament as the first servant with the unpayable debt.

So what happened to the gazillion dollars the first servant owed. Could the king just forget it? Were there no financial consequences? No, it wasn’t that easy. The moment the king forgave the debt, his net worth went down by ten thousand talents, by that gazillion dollars. It cost him *a lot* to forgive the debt. And just so when God forgives us. It cost him the death of his Son. No price can be put on that death, but God paid it anyway, so that he could forgive each of us the giant spiritual debt we owed to him.

So the message should be clear: The moral debt of wrongdoing, of sinful words and acts against us, is virtually nothing compared to our debt to God. My point isn’t to minimise the seriousness of anyone’s hurts or damages. Even in the parable, the second servant’s debt wasn’t just chump-change and neither are the wrongs others have committed against you – but in comparison to the hurt each of us has caused God, those other hurts are no comparison

So the basis for our forgiving one another, then, is the enormity of God’s forgiveness of us. We are called to forgive precisely because we have been forgiven so much. Until we acknowledge that we are the ten-thousand talent, the gazillion dollar debtor to God, we will continue to struggle with forgiving people who have wronged us in significant ways or people who continue to wrong us.

Once we embrace the reality that we truly are such debtors to God because of our *continual* sin against him, we can say when others wrong us, “God, that was a terrible wrong against me, but I’m the ten-thousand-talent debtor. His sin against me was nothing in comparison to my sin against you, and because you have forgiven me, I, from my heart, forgive that person. Amen.”