

Righteous Anger

James 1:17-27; Genesis 4:1-8; Matthew 5:21-26

You must understand this, my beloved:

*let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger;
for your anger does not produce God's righteousness.*

Already we have a problem,

because this verse immediately calls into question the title of this sermon,

If we accept it, there can be no such thing as *Righteous Anger*.

Be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger.

This bit of instruction shows us

that James does not hold a very modern view of anger.

Most psychologists today would cringe at the thought

that we are better off squelching our anger than speaking it.

It has become pretty well accepted that the repression of anger

leads to depression and all sorts of other mental and emotional maladies.

Holding anger inside is bad for the stomach, bad for the heart, bad for the brain,

and bad for the people around us

since repressed anger is going to find its way to the surface,

one way or another it's going to get out,

and it's not likely to be a pretty sight when it does.

Besides, what kind of advice is this anyway?

How much control do any of us really have over our feelings, our moods?

Scientists who study the brain can describe for us the chemical responses

that make the human body feel the emotion of anger,

and these responses are largely involuntary –

meaning we don't control them.

So what do we moderns do with James?

James is not alone in scripture when he speaks of anger as a vice.

Ephesians lists anger as a vice, alongside bitterness, wrath, slander, and malice.

Proverbs says it is *the fool [who] gives full vent to anger,*

but the wise quietly holds it back.

In Genesis, the story of Cain and Abel offers a stern warning against

letting anger get out of hand, until it is unleashed in lethal violence.

But perhaps it's Jesus who startles us with the most difficult teaching.

In the Sermon on the Mount, he says:

“You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times

‘You shall not murder’; and whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.

But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister,

you will be liable to judgment...

...and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire.”

Listening to these biblical warnings,

we can understand why Pope Gregory, in the 12th century,

included anger in the list of the seven deadly sins.

It would seem from *these* scriptures that our anger never pleases God,

never serves God's righteousness.

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But, like our human lives, the biblical witness is more complex than this.

A look at the Hebrew language of the Old Testament

shows a variety of words which refer to different kinds of anger.

First of all, the Old Testament speak about God's anger, or God's wrath.

Although one of the most frequently mentioned attributes of God

is that God is “slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love”,

God does nonetheless become angry in the Old Testament.
Anger seems to be an acceptable, even holy, attribute of a Righteous God.

One word expresses God's anger as a raging, roaring anger.
Another word, one of my favorites, and the most common Old Testament word for anger
means literally "the burning of the nostrils"
as when one holds in a great emotion;
imagine nostrils flaring, steam coming out of the ears.

And while the Old Testament is clear
that anger should never be vented through vengeance
(*Vengeance is mine, says the Lord!* Dt. 32:35)
there are a number of instances when human anger is presented as permissible,
as in Exodus when Moses becomes angry because the people disobey God,
although we also see Moses' anger getting him into trouble.

Then there is "provocative anger" which is to be avoided altogether,
as in Ecclesiastes 7, which says

*"Do not be quick to anger,
for anger lodges in the bosom of fools."*ⁱ

But the biblical picture is more complex still
in that Jesus himself, whom we are called to imitate, became angry.
In the Gospel of Mark, we are told once that he is "*moved with anger*";
and another time that he looks around at a synagogue crowd "*with anger*".
When Jesus overturns the tables of the money-changers in the temple,
(John even tells us that he made a whip of cords to drive them out)
it is hard to imagine him doing this in a totally dispassionate way,
without anger.

And in the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 23, Jesus launches into a fierce denunciation
of the Scribes and Pharisees, which is nothing if not angry,
and in this diatribe he addresses them as "You blind fools!",

whereas earlier he had said such language merited the hell of fire.
Though none of us, I think, would question the righteousness of Jesus' anger in that text,
it still stands in contrast to what he taught about anger.

Finally, there are in scripture a number of teachings that specifically allow anger.
Two similar passages one in the Psalms, and one in Ephesians, advise us to

Be angry, but do not sin.

Be angry, but do not sin.

With all of this biblical material taken together,
and with the modern understanding
that anger is a natural human response to certain situations,
we have to ask whether it might be possible for a Christian can be angry
in a way that does lead to God's righteousness.

When we look at the whole of scripture,
it seems we have to hold open the possibility of "righteous anger" –
that is, anger which leads to something that pleases God,
though it may be difficult, and perhaps even rare.

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So, what does Righteous Anger look like?

Or, to use James' words in a way he would not have used them,

What kind of anger leads to God's righteousness?

Well, there are clearly better ways than others to handle the emotion:
I hope it goes without saying that we should avoid violent vengeance,
whether in the form of shooting sprees at your place of business,
or acts of terrorism for whatever cause,
or waging war for the sake of vengeance,
or even just the verbal violence of an angry person

who emotionally abuses another.

These expressions of anger clearly do not lead to God's righteousness.

Another destructive possibility is suggested by Frederick Buechner, who muses that

“of the seven deadly sins, anger is possibly the most fun.

To lick your wounds, smack your lips over grievances long past,
to roll over your tongue the prospect of bitter confrontations still to come,
to savor to the last toothsome morsel both the pain you are given

and the pain you are giving back –

in many ways it is a feast fit for a king.

The chief drawback”, says Buechner, “is that what you are wolfing down
is yourself.

The skeleton at the feast is you.”

This sort of seething, festering fury is surely not following the admonition to
be angry but do not sin.

And I don't even think it is what James meant by being *slow to anger.*

The sin of holding anger inside is not only a sin against God and others
it is a sin against the self.

So, if lashing out in anger does not produce God's righteousness,
nor repressing anger, nor savoring it,

then what *are* we to do with our anger?

Instead of doing something DEstructive with our anger,
is there some CONstructive way to express anger?

Well, if we're trying to do something constructive,

it helps to have a vision of what it is we're trying to construct.

Or, even better, a vision of what God is constructing, or creating,

in our lives, our families, our community, our churches, and the world.

In his book on the Sermon on the Mount, Dale Allison of Pittsburgh Seminary offers us a helpful entry point into this question.ⁱⁱ

(And, by the way, in Coffee & Conversation this Fall, Dr. Allison will be teaching a few classes on the Sermon on the Mount. Keep your eyes on the schedule)

In the Sermon on the Mount, after Jesus teaches that anger is tantamount to murder, and deserves equal treatment under the law, he provides for us a couple of images of Christians making peace with one another, being reconciled to one another.

That is, Jesus offers us a vision of Christian community in which wounds are healed, offenses forgiven, and people do the hard work of reconciliation.

Jesus opens our eyes to glimpse the possibility of healed relationships, and a healing community in which those who are wronged can speak clearly to their offenders but with love, and with the hope of being reconciled.

So, Dr. Allison suggests, Jesus wisely commits us to finding the mean, or mid-point, between repression of anger and expression of anger, something between the extremes of ignoring or venting the anger within us, something between stifling anger or lashing out in anger.

If we can harness our anger so that this intense human energy moves us toward a vision of restored relationship, toward a vision of healing community, and ultimately, toward a vision of the kingdom of God, then perhaps our anger *can* lead to God's righteousness.

So, to turn our anger toward a constructive use,
we need to have in our minds a vision
of the kind of relationship God wants us to have
with the one who has offended us.

The vision Jesus offers is one of healing, within a community of healing and forgiveness.

And secondly, there is perhaps some help for us in moving toward that kind of healing
when we remember this:

that you and I and those who incite our anger are all in the same boat.

All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. (Rom 3:23)

The sin committed against you may have been heinous,
but none of us are clean, none of us are without sin,
all of us are liable to the judgment, even the hell of fire,
all of us deserve God's anger and live in need of God's mercy.

This is not a reason to ignore injustice, or to remain open to abuse! (Repeat)
but to realize that

for God to fashion a new, restored relationship between you and your offender,
for God to build the new community and include us in it,
you and I will stand in need of God's mercy,
just as much as our offenders.

Acknowledging with honesty our own broken condition before God
may perhaps slow our anger
so that we do not transgress the mercy that we have been shown.

One final bit of guidance from scripture about our anger.

Because these suggestions so far are rather rational, mental activities
they require us to achieve a somewhat cool head in order to see clearly
how we ought to proceed.

How do we get to that point? What do we do with the angry fire raging within?

Is there something more effective than counting to 10, or even 100, to calm our anger?

Yes, there certainly is, say the scriptures.

We give our anger to God. And I don't mean politely – if the Bible is any indication.

We give our anger to God in its rawest form.

To see how to do this read the Psalms.

Read the Book of Job.

God is big enough to take our anger in all its ugliness, to hear it, to absorb it,

and still love us, and heal us,

and turn us once again toward God's kingdom of peace.

There is no better medicine for your anger than this:

To pray your anger to God, as honestly as you know how.

If you can do that, you may be more likely to produce God's righteousness

through your anger,

in your life, and in the life of the one who has angered you.

May the Lord come to our aid, and show us the way.

ⁱ Hebrew word study relies on the work of Stephen D. Franklin's article, "Anger in the Hebrew Scriptures", in *The Living Pulpit*, Volume 2, Number 4, p. 12.

ⁱⁱ Dale C. Allison, *The Sermon on the Mount: Inspiring the Moral Imagination*. (New York: Crossroad Publishing Co., 1999) pp. 61-71.