

Lent 2021 : Anger

Every lent we look at ourselves and attempt to push through, or hack with a machete if need be, through our presuppositions, through our self-justifications, through our pride, to find the realization that we are a people in need. In need of a Savior.

This particular lent I am hoping some counseling reflections can bring us some insight into our often dark and fickle hearts and make room for comfort from the Mighty Counselor. And so we've been talking a lot about our feelings, as fun as that is. So far, we have looked at feelings of failure and struggles with identity – who we feel we are. But today we explore a feeling that, I am convinced, convicts us all: anger.

So I put forward this premise: In Christ, the Christian is saved from their anger and God's.

Jesus is angry in our Gospel lesson today. He literally casts cords of judgment upon the money changers in the temple. Now, we know Jesus is sinless. We also know he's angry. Some simple logic then, tells us that it isn't necessarily a sin to be angry. Anger, in it's base form, is a correct reaction to injustice, to wickedness, to evil, to a wrong being done. In that sense, anger is righteous. In that sense, God is *right* to be angry at evil – is he right to be angry at you?

“God is slow to anger,” the scriptures tell us. But that doesn’t mean he won’t ever get angry. Throughout the Bible his wrath and judgment are threatened and poured out. Don’t let this make you doubt the first point, however, that God is slow to anger. No, the amount of times we see God get angry in the Bible ought not make us think he is fickle or has a short fuse. Just the opposite, it ought make us reflect on the sheer amount of sinful wickedness mankind perpetrates. He isn’t an angry Father, we are disobedient children.

And therein lies the problem with anger. Sure, it isn’t necessarily a sin to be angry, but in our hands, not the Lord’s, not Jesus in the temple, in *our* hands – is anger such a good thing? I have to thank Dr. Gibbs from Concordia Seminary for his work on analyzing anger in the Bible – his work really allowed me to see how and how often the words related to anger are used. I commend his article to you all, really, ask me if you are interested. And I agree with his final premise – I might put it in my own words here: anger, for the sinner, is like explosives in the hands of a novice - it is to be handled as little as possible.

But we use it so often, don’t we? Oh don’t we love to see someone get their come-up-ins! We love it when that person we can’t stand gets “dunked on.” Our social media and political discourse is riddled with, “But look at them!” And when we are angry, we justify it shouting, “They are liars!” And I might respond, “Oh, “so *you* don’t lie?” “They are hurting people!” That is a shame. Do you? “They wronged

me! They deserve judgment.” Oh, you don’t? And before you accuse me of dodging the question, I am not saying we cannot mete right judgment on issues, I am saying that as we mete out judgment maybe we should first acknowledge that in some small (or big) way, we are not wholly unbiased, un hypocritical judges. And therein lies the difference between Jesus’ anger we read about today, and yours. He is wholly righteous so his anger is righteous, you are not wholly righteous on your own and so neither is your anger.

If you think me too severe in this regard, consider the scriptures. In the rare (like, two or three) cases they acknowledge the Christian has the capacity for anger that isn’t sin, a warning is close at hand. “Be angry and do not sin,” We are warned by Paul in Ephesians 4. And it is immediately followed by: “Do not let the sun go down on your anger.” Get rid of it, deal with it, quickly. It’s explosive. He continues: “So as to give no opportunity to the devil.” That’s right, even if your anger is righteous, the devil wants you angry because he can use that. And he will. Or have none of us regretted something we’ve done or said in anger?

God, it appears to me, doesn’t want his people to be angry. The Proverbs are full of this. “A man of quick temper acts foolishly.” “Good sense makes one slow to anger.” “Whoever is slow to anger is better than the mighty.”

And lest you think your anger is not a problem. Consider the words of our Lord “But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ will be liable to the hell of fire.” Now, we could argue who the “brother” is there, but the point is: Jesus so closely associates our anger with sin, he just assumes it! Paul does exactly the same when he includes it in a list of other sins. 2 Cor 12 “ For I fear that perhaps when I come I may find you not as I wish, and that you may find me not as you wish—that perhaps there may be quarreling, jealousy, *anger*, hostility, slander, gossip, conceit, and disorder.” In Galatians, Ephesians, and Colossians you will find similar lists with *anger* in them. Again, what’s the point: there may be times when your anger is wholly righteous, but sin is so close at hand Jesus and Paul are happy to assume it’s there.

Even the imprecatory psalms – those where the believer cries out for justice and harm to come to their enemies, even those psalms are spoken in the *passive* tense. “God, *you* do this to avenge us, please!” And so revenge isn’t some wild vigilantism, but placed in the hands of the truly righteous God to dole out in his good patience and pleasure and by his appointed means. So, by all means, call the cops if you are wronged, but let’s be real careful with how we handle the fallout.

Everyone who comes into my office has anger. And that includes me! The one who comes to confess is angry at themselves. The one with depression or grief is angry

at God. Some leave angry at me for not fixing them, or telling them what they don't want to hear – which, coincidentally, tends to make me angry. Some people come specifically because of their anger. The ulcers, the bitterness, the toxicity have simply become too much.

So where does an amateur counselor start with that? Well, with a bit of what we have been over today. So, first come's some confession. Admitting that we are angry. Like any of the other feelings, it isn't helpful at all to deny that we are feeling a certain way. But what you do with that feeling certainly matters, no? So what can we do with anger? We confess it and then, second, I think it's helpful to establish how justified it is. I realize I just gave half a sermon saying our anger is hardly righteous - and I stand by that. But if a wrong has been done, we can state that, because the next step is recognizing if we have contributed to it, overreacted to it, or reacted to it wrongly. For example, the couple that keeps bringing up every single slight their spouse has ever done, that conversation is a lot different than the victim of abuse. The victim may have done nothing wrong and we need to work through the feelings of anger in a godly way to promote healing. The couple needs to admit they both contributed to the bitterness with their own stubborn pride or whatever.

And so ultimately the antidote to anger is perspective. Do you *have* to yell at the waiter because they are out of pulled-pork? Do you *have* to curse at the stoplight or

will you survive for another two minutes? Perhaps in these scenarios we need to actively begin remembering our priorities, our blessings, and the mercy of God that has been given to us.

And when we truly are wronged, when that person lies about us, when they cheat on us, when they revile us for doing the right thing, when we turn on the news and see injustice, we might feel angry, and perhaps we should. But how are we going to respond? Are we going to repay with curse and violence? Or maybe give reasoned thought to how we can serve them, others, and the truth? I think that is a better way.

And you, Christian, you know there is a righteous judge and you know it isn't you. So why do you anger, and ulcer, and rage when you know the King of kings sees all, knows the truth, and will vindicate you? Repent of your anger. Get a perspective of who is in charge and knows every injustice. Including those you have done. So, Christian, even more as we confess our sin, let's mean it. Let's be mindful that we have received mercy upon mercy from God who suffered unjustly for our sins, why are we so unwilling to be treated unjustly or to share that mercy?

James writes "Be slow to anger. For anger does not produce the righteousness of God!" Well then what does produce the righteousness of God? Mercy! That's right. How are we with our anger and bitterness and grudges and skewed

perspective and selfishness, how are we made righteous before God? By his mercy shown in Jesus. In his death and resurrection our sin is atoned for. By his cross, justice is poured out on the sacrifice and his perfect, righteous life, angry or otherwise, is given to us for free through faith in his work and promise.

Mercy brings about righteousness. God's mercy has made you right with him. You want healing? You want the bitterness to fade, you want the grudges to heal?

Meditate on the mercy of God for you, and I mean that: read your bible, say your prayers, come to the altar. And you just might find the Savior has healing abundant for your anger. Even as he already has addressed the issues of God's righteous anger at you. Because he has taken that wrath upon himself, so that the Father sees you not as an angry, fickle, toxic, person deserving his fury, but as cleansed, redeemed, and a beloved child who he is happy to give his Kingdom to. In Christ, the Christian is saved from their anger, and God's. Amen.