

## **Anger**

### **Numbers 14:1-23; Matthew 5:17-26**

Last month, a woman was driving along Guildford Road in Sydney. According to the Sydney Morning Herald, a Pajero made a U-turn in front of her, forcing her to brake and sound her horn. I'm not quite sure how they forced her to sound her horn, but that's what the article says. The woman continued driving and the Pajero followed her and then pulled up beside her. One of the three men in the Pajero got out and produced a knife. Two men in the woman's car were taken to Westmead Hospital with knife wounds.

Now, I don't know if that was an incident of road rage or if there was more to it. At the time of the article, the police were still looking for the three men. Maybe there was some premeditation involved. Yet, the media report more and more incidents like that – people expressing their anger on the road. And it's not only road rage we're confronted with – there's also:

- Air rage
- Bus rage
- Office rage
- Desk rage
- Shopping trolley rage
- Computer rage
- Cell rage

And a whole host of others. It seems we're becoming a very angry society.

### **What is Anger?**

What is anger? I suspect most of us have a pretty good idea. It's a strong emotion that wells up inside and some-

times bubbles over. It often seems to strike when we feel hurt – when something's happened in our lives that causes us pain. Its colour is red. It's hot. Hot words are associated with it – words like *simmer* and *sizzle* and *fume* and *boil* and *blaze* and *erupt* and *explode*. It can *scorch* and *burn* and *devour* other people. It gets the blood pressure up and the adrenalin pumping. It makes us feel very alive – but not necessarily in a good sense. From personal experience, we know what it is.

Yet, it's always wise to ask: Have we got it right? My trusty *Macquarie Budget Dictionary* states it's "a strongly felt displeasure aroused by real or supposed wrongs, often accompanied by an impulse to retaliate".<sup>1</sup> That got me thinking: Are there times I've got angry when I didn't feel wronged? For example, I think there were times I was justly punished for something I did wrong, when I got angry.

- Maybe I wasn't at the point of admitting my wrong.
- Maybe I thought the punishment excessive.

Or maybe we should leave open the possibility that sometimes we get angry without a perceived wrong.

Let me throw another spanner in the works – though this one's more than a mere possibility. Several years ago, I first came across the idea of depression as frozen anger. Sounds weird at first, doesn't it? If anger's hot and steaming and boiling over, how can it be frozen? Yet, Frank Minirth and Paul Meier (two Christian psychologists) in their book, *Happiness is a Choice*, say this:

The root problem in nearly all depressions is pent-up anger, either toward ourselves (true or false guilt) or toward others (holding grudges). These grudges are

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<sup>1</sup> *Macquarie Budget Dictionary* (Sydney: Macquarie Library, 1995) 18.

usually *unconscious* (that is, we are unaware of them), because we are ashamed or afraid to admit them to ourselves.<sup>2</sup>

Now please note: there are other causes of depression as well. They don't say this is the root of all depression. But they do say it's the main cause for many depressions.

I wanted to introduce that at this definition stage to highlight that anger can express itself in many forms.

- Some people are hot, fly-off-the-handle types.
- Some react with violent actions.
- Some respond with explosive words.
- Some resort to biting sarcasm.

That's the red anger that boils over. But sometimes it doesn't boil over. Some people have self-control.

- Some express their anger calmly, but forcefully.
- Some plot sneaky forms of revenge.
- Some count to 10 and walk away.
- Some go and hit a punching bag.

And some people have even greater self-control.

- Some do nothing but are grouchy with the family.
- Some just simmer inside – it never surfaces.
- Some find ways to distract themselves.
- And some pretend to themselves they're not angry.

We need to be clear at the outset that anger's more than just what we see in road rage. That's one extreme. We can look at that extreme and think: That's not me. I'm OK on this one. Just because you aren't at that extreme doesn't mean you're not angry. The manifestation of road rage includes using a gun to express your anger. It also includes things like:

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<sup>2</sup> F.Minirth & P.Meier, *Happiness is a Choice* (Grand Rapids: Revell, 1994) 52.

- rude gestures;
- tailgating; and
- sounding the horn excessively.

And, if we're honest with ourselves, it also includes the anger that's felt as frustration because of the arrogant or stupid actions of other drivers.

We also need to be clear at the outset that not all anger is wrong. I did a quick search of the New Testament on my computer.

- The word *angry* occurs 10 times – 8 of them refer to human anger; 2 of them to God's anger.
- The word *anger* occurs 12 times – 8 of them refer to human anger; 4 of them to God's anger.
- The word *wrath* (which is just another word for *anger*) occurs 29 times – and all but one of them refers to God's anger.

God is perfectly good and God gets angry.

What are we to do with that? Two possibilities:

- We could conclude that God's anger is something different from our anger – and maybe the use of the word *wrath* would point us in that direction. But, while the NIV uses two different English words, it's usually the one Greek word that's behind them both.
- Or we could conclude that some anger's right and some anger's wrong – sometimes we're right to get angry and sometimes we're wrong to get angry. Or sometimes we're right to get angry, but the way we express that is wrong.

### **The Characteristics of Wrong Anger**

So what is it that makes our anger wrong? **First**, our anger's sinful when the motive's wrong. We get angry for

all sorts of reasons – but often those reasons can be traced back to self-centredness. It's about me and what I want and what I think my rights are. It comes out in two ways.

- One way focuses on what I think I'm entitled to. It says: "I deserve this. I'm owed this. This is mine by right." You see it in children. Suppose you've got two children in the room. Try giving one an ice-cream and not the other. The one who misses out gets angry. They think it's not fair. They think they *deserve* the *gift* of an ice-cream just as much as the other child. And we don't grow out of it as we get older. And our society, with its great emphasis on individual human rights, encourages it. Today, it seems any felt need becomes our right. We're owed it. If we don't have it, we should be given it. No wonder there's so much rage around us.
- The other way focuses on things I have that I think I don't deserve. It's the self-pity angle. Something bad happens to me. I think: "This shouldn't happen to me. It's not warranted. It's unfair. I didn't do anything to deserve this."

One way arises out of not having something you think you should have. The other comes from something you think you shouldn't have. But both come from totally self-centred motives.

**Secondly**, anger's sinful when self-control is lost. Initially, anger's an emotion. It's an automatic internal reaction. It's a feeling that wells up inside. You read of the Holocaust or the Killing Fields of Cambodia and it makes you angry. You suffer some injustice and it makes you angry. It's a right reaction. What do you do with that emotion?

- Do you allow it to control you?
- Do you use it as an excuse to treat others badly?

- Do you take it out on your family?

The fruit of the Spirit is self-control.

Your will may not be responsible for the rise of the emotion, but it is responsible for what you do with it. Given the emotion that's there, your will decides how to proceed

- Will you suppress it – pretend you're not angry and try to control the emotion and bottle it up inside?
- Will you ignore it – put it in the too hard basket and decide it's something others should solve?
- Will you feed it – savour it and dwell on it and obsess on it and blow it out of all proportion?
- Will you surrender to it – treat it as not in your control and simply go with the flow of the feeling?

Will you control it or let it control you? Will you keep throwing fuel on the smouldering fire?

**Thirdly**, and closely related, anger's sinful when it gives rise to excessive expression.

- That excessive expression could come from a lack of self-control. Some people simply explode. They rant and rave. They vent. They fly off the handle. They go off the deep end. There's no attempt to control their anger. There's no concern for others. They simply lash out in the heat of their anger.
- But that excessive expression may also come from a foundation of self-control. Imagine a parent telling their child quite calmly:

That's the third time you've defied me. I gave you two warnings. You knew the consequences. Now, I'll have to kill you.

That would be self-controlled but excessive. But perhaps you could argue the excessiveness comes from something other than anger at this point.

**Fourthly**, anger's sinful when it plots revenge. It wants to see the other person suffer. It wants to cause hurt. It wants to get back on level playing terms. It wants justice – although it's usually a self-centred form of justice.

- It wants vindication for self.
- It wants to cause as much hurt to the other person as they've caused to me – with a little bit of interest.

But it's not really seeking for the good of the other person – it's seeking for my good. And it's not pausing to ask where it all fits into God's scheme of things – or, if it does, it's only to bolster my own case and to vindicate my own sense of self-righteousness.

**Fifthly**, anger's sinful when it devalues the other person. Yes, they've done the wrong thing. Yes, they deserve to be punished. But they remain a human being just like me – someone made in God's image and someone for whom Jesus died. So, certain things are off-limits.

- Personal verbal abuse of the other person.
- Treating them with contempt.
- Slandering their reputation.
- Thinking they're less important.

When I'm angry with someone because they've done me wrong, I'm tempted to focus on self rather than them. I'm tempted to look after my own interests and not theirs. I'm tempted to act from motives other than love. I'm tempted to justify ungodly responses in myself.

### **The Idolatry of Anger**

And that brings us to the root issue – the danger of idolatry. Anger becomes sinful when I have the wrong god – when I put something else in place of the real God. And, in the case of anger, that something else is myself.

It's become an art-form in our culture. There's so much focus on the individual.

- I must be free to develop my full potential.
- I must be free to express myself however I feel.
- I determine what I want from life.
- I determine my own destiny.
- I have rights to have my needs met.
- I'm entitled to a certain standard of living.

We're fed this stuff over and over again. And so, when we find our desires blocked, we get angry. The god of self isn't being looked after properly. My rights have been violated. Something must be done to rectify things. I'm justified to take whatever action necessary to restore my rights.

And the real God is sidelined by my idolatry.

- I'm more interested in massaging my ego than in living for His glory.
- I'm more interested in getting what is rightfully mine than in pursuing godliness.
- I'm more interested in coming out on top than in showing love to those made in God's image.

And so, in the process of worshipping at the altar of self, I can justify pride, defending my reputation, boastfulness, slander, abuse, hate, contempt, scheming, revenge and a whole host of wickedness that doesn't come from love.

- This wickedness may boil over in an explosive outburst of searing heat that burns all before it.
- In contrast, it may flow steadily in the icy frozenness of the cold shoulder.
- It may simmer for years in the scheming plots of imagined revenge.
- It may disguise itself in the pleasant warmth of self-

righteous indignation.

It all stems from the wicked enthronement of self.

### What's the Antidote?

So, what's to be done about it? The observant among you will have noticed we haven't opened the Bible yet – other than to mention my quick survey of the New Testament.

- Part of the reason for that is the general nature of the material we've covered so far.
- Part of the reason is we've been painting with broad brush-strokes – looking at ideas that are generally Biblical without focusing in on a particular text.

For some points, we could have looked at particular texts – for example, the idea of devaluing the other person is spoken about by Jesus in Matthew 5:21-26. But, for the sake of time, I didn't do that.

However, as we think about how we should handle our anger, let's turn to a number of passages. First, we need to learn to think right. I want to mention three aspects.

Number 1: smash the idol of self. Philippians 2:3-5

*Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus ...*

And so it goes on in that well-known passage.

So much of my anger stems from me thinking I'm not getting my rights or me thinking my rights are violated. I get angry and want to fix that up. Jesus encourages me to walk the path He walked – to give up my rights for the sake of serving others. But I can't do that while self is

still on the throne. It's not simply a matter of resolving not to lose my temper. That's not the real issue. I have to deal with the idol. I have to get rid of it and submit to God at that level. Then I'll recognise my deep-seated wickedness and be freed to deal with others in humility.

Number 2: trust God's sovereignty. Romans 12:17-21

*Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. On the contrary:*

*If your enemy is hungry, feed him;*

*if he is thirsty, give him something to drink.*

*In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.*

*Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*

It's right that we want justice. That's a godly desire. And God says He will ultimately bring justice when Jesus returns to judge the world. What does that justice look like? It's complex. But two things stand out.

- First, Jesus' death is involved. The just judgment for my sin was paid by Jesus. Because of that, I receive mercy instead of justice. That's how God treats my wrongs against Him. I need to factor that in when I want to demand justice for those who wrong me.
- Secondly, when Jesus returns, those who remain God's enemies will be overthrown. They'll receive justice – and that justice will be without mercy.

And so, when someone deprives me of those personal rights I've given up, I can leave the issues of justice in God's hands.

- Because of my finiteness, I'm likely to get it wrong.
- Because of my sinfulness, I'm likely to over-react.

So, it's not wise for me to take things into my own hands. But God, in His infinite wisdom, will put things right in the long run. I can leave it to Him. I can trust Him. So, I don't need to focus on revenge.

Number 3: love your enemies. Matthew 5:43-45

*You have heard that it was said, "Love your neighbour and hate your enemy." But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven.*

Loving people means working for their good – not mine. It means striving for what's in their best interests – not what's in my best interests.

Now, it may very well be in their best interests to suffer for the wrong they've done.

- It may be good for them to have it pointed out.
- It may be good for them to be held accountable.
- It may be good for them to be challenged to repent.
- It may be good for them to make reparation.

And it may be that the wronged person has to initiate these things. But the issue is one of motivation. Why is the wronged person taking this action?

- Am I doing it because I want revenge – because I've been hurt and I want to hit back – because I want justice for me – because my idol's been offended?
- Or am I doing it because I genuinely want to see this person grow in godliness?

Now, you may have noticed that the word *anger* or *angry* or *wrath* didn't appear in any of those three passages. It's important to get the general principles right first. Before we get to the specific practical advice, we have to get it in the context of godly thinking.

Within that context, the Bible also offers some practical advice. Four things for this morning – two from the Old Testament and two from the New. This is the order they appear in the Bible. And this time they're verses that do use the word *anger* or *angry*.

Number 1: exercise self-control. Proverbs 29:11

*A fool gives full vent to his anger,  
but a wise man keeps himself under control.*

Some theories encourage people to assertively vent their anger. Other theories encourage the full expression of anger in private – screaming or yelling or punching walls or smashing things. God gives us His Spirit to enable us to be self-controlled. It's the fool – the godless person – who surrenders his will to his anger and loses control.

- That doesn't mean we lock anger away inside.
- Nor does it mean we pretend it doesn't exist.

But we deal with anger in a controlled way.

- We ask: Why do I respond like this? Is my anger justified? Is my reaction self-centred?
- We think though: Is there a godly way for me to express this anger? How can I honour God in this situation? How can I show love to this person?

Number 2: remind yourself that anger quickly leads to many other sins. Proverbs 29:22

*An angry man stirs up dissension,  
and a hot-tempered one commits many sins.*

Anger expressed from a base of self-centredness causes all sorts of problems. We've touched on many of those earlier. We don't like being around angry people. What makes us think people like being near us when we're angry? And if people can't escape our angry presence, they're likely to respond in kind. When that happens, it becomes a vicious circle.

Number 3: set a time limit on your anger. Ephesians 4:26

*"In your anger do not sin": Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold.*

In other words, deal with your anger quickly – not quickly in the sense of just letting it all out explosively, but quickly in the sense of not letting it fester inside. Deal with the issue before you go to bed. If you don't, your mind keeps working it over and it'll disturb your sleep and eat away at your very soul.

Number 4: be slow to speak. James 1:19-20

*My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires.*

Think very carefully before you put your mouth in gear. Count to ten if that helps. If it doesn't help, count to ten again. Make sure you've got the facts right. Make sure you truly understand. Make sure you understand your own heart and your own motivations.

### **How do you Handle Anger?**

We've covered a lot this morning – and there's also a lot we haven't covered – but we must draw to a conclusion. How do you handle your anger? In a sinful world full of

wickedness and injustice, we will get angry. It's inevitable. But what will you do with that anger?

- Will you use it to add more wickedness and injustice to the mix – to throw in some pride or slander or biting words or contempt or violence?
- Will you use it as an opportunity to worship the god who's really sitting on the throne of your life – your own ego?
- Or will you use it to advance God's kingdom – to resist the evil in this world and to work to right injustices?

The truly self-controlled person – the person led by God's Spirit – doesn't look to their own interests. They don't act to protect themselves. They don't retaliate. They're not after revenge. Rather, they've done with self. They're free to do good to others. They're free to fight for their godliness. Will you ask God to continue that work within you?