

se7en: Wrath

Reconnect – March 8, 2009

Text: James 1:19-21; Romans 12:21; Ephesians 4:26-27

Key Thought: Wrath disconnects and destroys, but Jesus offers the antidote: a connection with God that brings health, life and joy.

Understand this, my dear friends: You must all be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to get angry. Human anger does not produce the just kind of life God desires. So get rid of all the filth and evil in your lives, and humbly accept the word God has planted in your hearts, for it has the power to save your souls. (James 1:19-21, NLT)

Pre-Intro: “Hilarious Hulk”

Intro: “You Wouldn’t Like Me When I’m Angry”

- “You wouldn’t like me when I’m angry” – anyone watch that show when they were a kid?
- I did – and the nightmares it brought on – hard to believe, after seeing that video clip, but it’s still true
- That phrase from that show has become part of our culture – something people say as a joke – but it reflects something true that most of us feel deep down: people wouldn’t like us IF we were angry, let alone WHEN we were angry
- We all know someone who, in our opinion anyway, is angry
- And the stereotypical angry person is someone who shouts, maybe cusses, is quick to lose their temper or get frustrated regularly – someone who you quickly learn to avoid when they’re having an “off day”
- What’s interesting about that is while we all could probably name at least one angry person we know (and no, I’m not asking, so don’t say your spouse, or they WILL be angry), rarely will anyone admit to being angry themselves – it’s not a label that most people like to use
- But in general, we all get angry from time to time – we just “wear” it differently

My anger, your anger – different look, but the same impact

- Let me get a volunteer to illustrate **[someone from the audience to throw me the Winnie ball]**
- (I chose the Winnie-the-Pooh ball to use because if anyone has anger issues, it’s clearly Winnie-The-Pooh – OK, well, it’s Rabbit, but let’s not quibble – he’s mad because he has no merchandise)
- Let’s make the ball something that triggers our anger: a circumstance, a situation, one of your in-laws
- When it comes, we react in different ways:
 - **[smash the ball back]** Some of us throw it right back – we blow up, we get mad, we stomp our feet and shout – in essence, we take a toss and we throw it back harder – bump, set, spike
 - **[catch the ball and hold onto it, tightly]** Others of us like to keep it – keep it really close, and carry it around with us for a long, long time after – and add it to our collection of stuff that we are holding on to – yes, that’s the passive-aggressive kind
 - **[catch the ball, put it down gently]** And finally, a few of us are able to catch it, set it down and leave it behind – we deal with it so that any harmful effects are minimized or defused

- But no matter our reaction, it does come, and it always has the potential to be extremely destructive
- Wrath is the word traditionally used for unrestrained anger – when someone completely loses it and their anger becomes destructive, vengeful, consuming
- This morning we’re going to use the word anger more, because wrath is a word that has fallen out of normal usage, but anger is something that we can all understand and likely even identify with
- And this is not unique to our time or culture either – anger has been a universal emotion, ever since Cain killed Abel
- The writers of the New Testament section of the Bible knew that all too well, and they wrote to try to help the people of their congregations deal with their anger in such a way that it wouldn’t destroy themselves or those around them
- Like the section of the letter that James wrote, which was read earlier

Read Text: James 1:19-21

Understand this, my dear friends: You must all be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to get angry. Human anger does not produce the just kind of life God desires. So get rid of all the filth and evil in your lives, and humbly accept the word God has planted in your hearts, for it has the power to save your souls. (James 1:19-21)

- James, the author of the letter, was a brother of Jesus – he didn’t believe in Jesus while Jesus was on earth, but at some point after he came back from the dead, he believed – and he became, eventually, the leader of the Christians in Jerusalem, the Jewish capital
- The vast majority of Christians in Jerusalem had converted from Judaism, like James – and James was known all through the city, tradition tells us, as a person who did the right thing – “James the Just” – even those who were his enemies agreed that he was a godly, good person
- James writes his letter to the “twelve tribes scattered among the nations” – in other words, to Jewish-Christians who have, whether due to persecution or otherwise, pushed out among the rest of the nations of the world – it’s a letter from home, a reminder of who they are and who they should continue to be, as they try to live for God in very different circumstances than they’re used to
- And one of the areas he speaks about in his letter is anger, and how not to give in to it
- Why anger? They had gone from a very cloistered, holy city, where everything was religion and faith, to places where religion was just one more excuse for wild living, and everyone was just trying to get by the best they could – so yeah, there could be some anger and outrage going on there
- Let’s take a closer look

A Closer Look:

“be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry”

- Anger is generally a reaction to a perceived injustice – someone cuts us off on the highway, or insults us, or rips us off – it doesn’t have to be to us – just read the newspaper and there’s plenty to get outraged about – but there is some kind of perceived injustice happening
- If we can’t do anything about the situation, then we either drop it, or we get angrier
- **III. – Losing it in Bible College**
 - I remember my second year of Bible College – not only did we have to wear shirts and ties to our classes, but we also had to show up – they took attendance – which for me, might have been even worse than the shirt and the tie
 - I had skipped my way through high school and still done well, and generally figured that if the class was worth going to, I’d go, and otherwise, or if I had something better to do, I wouldn’t
 - But then, at Bible College, they took attendance – and if you missed too many classes, you would lose marks
 - So it was actually a class, ironically enough, on preaching, in my second year
 - I had already skipped one of the classes (it was a morning class) for some reason or other, and now I was out of skips – and there was going to be a test that morning anyway
 - On a completely unrelated note, I had recently bought a fancy new clock-radio-alarm, which featured even a CD player, which I used to get up in the morning (can’t you just call it already?)
 - So that morning, my alarm didn’t go off – or I didn’t set it right – but I’m sticking with the “my alarm didn’t go off” – and all my friends who were in the class didn’t think it important to come down and check on me, still snoring away in the dorm, either
 - I missed the test, running into the class just as it was ending, with my tie tucked into my pants and my shirt around my neck – so, missed test, lost marks, missed class, lost marks, not cool
 - I went back to my dorm room and gently unplugged my brand new clock radio alarm, and went into a tiny room across the hall, which was supposed to be used for studying, but never was – too small, no ventilation, and it always smelled like B.O. – but it was pretty much soundproof
 - And there I smashed it into about a thousand small pieces, swinging it over my head by the power cord like it was Thor’s hammer and screaming like a lunatic
 - Then, with that out of my system, I left the room and headed to my next class
 - That night, the custodian remarked on finding a bunch of pieces of something or other, and wondered who could have been so worked up as to do that?
 - To which I sagely nodded and said, “Wow – people ARE strange, aren’t they?”
- A large part of anger is about a loss of control – the end result is a loss of control over ourselves – but it’s normally a reaction to a loss of control over someone or something else – our circumstances, our inability to change what we want to change, make happen what we want to have happen – either in us, with regards to us, or with regards to someone else
- And what we can’t control, we want to either gain control of, or destroy – either is generally good, just like a four year old in a temper tantrum
- Anger, James says, should be a last resort – after listening a lot, after speaking a little – always the last resort, not the first option

“Human anger does not produce the just kind of life God desires”

- When I see an absolute like this, I always want to find an exception – must be my personality
- And there are exceptions, certainly, grounded in God Himself
- Because, James is first of all careful to say, “human anger”

God’s anger: good

- God gets angry – in fact, some people stereotype God as being generally angry all the time, even though that’s far from the truth
- There are some things that God hates, which you learn as you read the Bible, and things that make Him angry, and as you look at it, it makes sense, because we can see some parallels in our own lives:
- Proverbs 6 says

“There are six things the LORD hates—no, seven things he detests:

haughty eyes, (pride)

a lying tongue, (lies)

hands that kill the innocent, (violence, oppression, abuse – especially to kids)

a heart that plots evil,

feet that race to do wrong,

a false witness who pours out lies,

a person who sows discord among brothers [in other words, breaks community].”

(Proverbs 6:16-19)

- And then there are others – idolatry (putting something smaller than yourself first in your life, which cheapens you and rips off God, too), oppression, hypocrisy – the list goes on
- Why does He get bugged so much? Because all of these things hurt people – and we’re his children, and he loves us more than we can understand – just as we love our kids more than they can know, until one day when they themselves are parents

“When we think about it, we wouldn’t much like a God who didn’t get angry at mass murder, pointless cruelty or cancer. A God who simply shrugged his shoulders, helpless or pathetically passive about such horrors, would be outrageous and certainly not worth worshipping. So in a sense we expect God to be angry sometimes. We just don’t want him to be angry at us”
(Tomlin 89)

- Thankfully, what keeps God from turning into “Rage-boy”, is that anger is not God’s preferred emotion – it is the response of his love to evil – to protect those he loves – he takes no pleasure in anything else
- That’s why He forgives again and again and shows such patience with each of us and with our society and world
- So God’s anger is good, and destroys what isn’t good – but our anger falls far short of that most times

Our anger: not nearly as good

- And anger is like fire – it burns whatever it touches, including the person who uses it – so the longer you use it, the more likely YOU are to be burned, and the more likely things around you will be destroyed
 - Sometimes things need to be destroyed – things that are wrong we SHOULD be angry at – children starving to death, war criminals, layoffs and bonuses by greedy executives side by side in companies – some things need anger to burn them up, make them clear, melt them down
 - Getting angry at those things can give us strength, clarity of purpose, determination – like a Red Bull or Pepsi after Lent
 - But the great lie of anger is that it will make us feel better to turn that fire on those we love, those we interact with – on the people around us – those who love us – family, children, spouse, parents, neighbours, friends, coworkers – and there are people who feel the fire of anger (and live with the burns) every day
 - It's like the spate of honour killings and acid face burnings in different cultures – troubled young men who are rejected (rightly so) by women decide to ruin those women instead and do violence to them
 - Most of us are disgusted by these abhorrent acts – but then we may get angry at someone on a regular basis – and on an emotional level, we're flicking acid
- So human anger is not going to product the just kind of life God is looking for, because anger is a destructive force, and it doesn't produce *anything* – it destroys things
- Like a person holding a flamethrower – it's not something that produces anything but destruction, and you don't tend to go and pick it up unless you've got something you want to destroy

Getting a grip on anger:

Of the Seven Deadly Sins, anger is possibly the most fun. To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll over your tongue the prospect of bitter confrontations still to come, to savour 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 is that what you are wolfing down is yourself.

The skeleton at the feast is you.

– Frederick Buechner (BEEK-ner)

- We must get a grip on our anger – whether we tend to lose it, or whether we are “good, churchy people” and we've learned to hide it in passive-aggressive ways as brittle, super-spiritual people
- Either way, it is killing us, and killing those around us, and killing the cause of Christ in and through us
- But the answer is not to just never get angry – that's not possible, and it's not even right, because if we claim to be following God, imitating Jesus, then anger will come, because the Bible records again and again that they are at times angry – there are things they hate – there are things that enrage them

Step 1: Get mad – but at the right things

- The first way to get a grip on anger is to keep getting mad – but to start to get mad at the right things, which are, the wrong things – the things that are just wrong, the things that God is angry at
- What CAN we get angry at? Take a look at the life of Jesus, in the Bible records, and see:
 - Hypocrisy
 - Oppression
 - The sins that bound people
 - Disease
 - Injustice
 - Exploitation (but this is just a starter list)
- Sometimes we sin by NOT getting angry at things we SHOULD be getting angry at – and that’s a sin too – just never being angry is not a virtue, because of the way we see that Jesus lived
- But anger ultimately is God’s domain – He’s the one who can get angry without sinning, and our anger is a pale copy of his, as Peter Kreeft says in his book Back To Virtue – when we are angry at evil and we respond by making a change for good, then we are acting like him – it’s one more way that we are in his image, in that we can think and respond instead of just reacting out of hurt or fear – but most of the time, our anger is a caricature of his, not the same at all, just a wretched copy of his

Step 2: Ask yourself some blunt questions, and be honest with yourself

Some questions to ask in dealing with anger:

- 1) **What makes you angry?**
 - 2) **Why are you (really) angry?**
 - 3) **Who are you (really) angry at?**
 - 4) **Does your reaction/response match the situation? i.e. are you angry at the right person, for the right reason, in the right amount, like Aristotle said?**
- We’ve got to get a handle on these questions, if we’re ever going to find relief – and if you can’t get straight answers from yourself, then that’s when you need to sit down with someone else – a trusted friend who will tell you the truth, or a professional counsellor
 - **III. – Customer service** – if someone flies into a rage over a three dollar charge, chances are it’s not the charge – it’s that on the way here they found out that a loved one had died, or they just lost their job, or they were chewed out by their boss earlier in the day, or everything else is in the dumper – there’s generally something deeper, something else at work, because generally people aren’t like that
 - But some are – they’re the ones who give themselves to that again and again, and “throwing the ‘lose it’ switch” gets easier and easier for them – like working a circuit breaker too many times – and it gets so loose that any kind of surge sets it off – we can replace a faulty breaker, but it takes some more work to fix a person with an anger problem

Step 3: Seek peace, practice forgiveness, and choose to love

- The final step is to start building positives into our lives – “firewalls”, that will allow us to process our anger, release it in healthy ways and let the rest really and truly go
- One of those firewalls is to seek peace: make time for God, rest, meditate, slow down, take a vacation, de-stress – road rage doesn’t happen when we’re at peace, because there’s nothing to trigger a pre-existing angry condition
- Another firewall is to practice forgiveness – to let go of the anger of the past that we are still clutching onto, that we won’t let go of – to forgive those who have wronged us – it doesn’t change that what happened was wrong, it doesn’t change the pain that was – but it can put a stop to that pain continuing with us any farther
- A final firewall is to choose to love
- Just that simple phrase: “I choose to love” - one little phrase to defuse anger
- Something makes you angry? Someone makes you see red? “I choose to love” – to work for the best, not the worst, to build up and not destroy
- Take James’ advice: listen more, talk less, and make anger a last resort
- The cumulative result of these firewalls is the final part of James’ instruction to his people:

“So get rid of all the filth and evil in your lives, and humbly accept the word God has planted in your hearts, for it has the power to save your souls.”

- So many times our anger starts with ourselves – we know we’re not right, we know something is wrong, we’re angry that we fail, that we can’t change, that we can’t do or be or get what we want, that we blame someone else or something else instead of ourselves, because we can’t come to grips with the fact that it IS us, in the way of us
- And that’s junk – filth, really – that gets in the way of what God wants to do in us

Key Thought:

Wrath disconnects and destroys, but Jesus offers the antidote: a connection with God that brings health, life and joy.

And “don’t sin by letting anger control you.” Don’t let the sun go down while you are still angry, for anger gives a foothold to the devil. (Ephesians 4:26-27, NLT)

- As we get rid of what weighs us down, we are set free for so much more

Conclusion: Anger's destructive force in my life

- We must get a handle on the destructive force of anger in our lives, or we risk everything, and not only ourselves, but the ones closest to us, the ones we love – our friends, our spouses, our children
- III. – me growing up with Mom's anger problem
 - What that was like – late nights, fear, tears
 - What it produced – the “chameleon effect”, dislike of open conflict/fights/people shouting at each other, people pleasing, desire to make people happy that I have to overcome sometimes to show good judgement
 - Net effect: brokenness, and a need for God's healing
 - As well as a fear that this sort of thing will continue in my life with my children, even in a muted or lesser form
- We must make a change – whether anger has burned us, or is burning us, or we are burning others, change must come – we must extinguish this fire that rages among us, and learn to turn that fire on what needs to be melted and reformed in our world
- That comes with Jesus moving towards the centre – in healing, in justice, in love – and us responding to His love in our lives, and being set free from fear, striving and control issues
- **“Don't let evil conquer you, but conquer evil by doing good.” (Romans 12:21, NLT) – a verse for me**

Response:

- “May The Words Of My Mouth” – Tim Hughes (video)

Offer for Prayer after