
Wise Words

Practical Wisdom for Dealing with Anger

By Ed McNeese

Introduction This Sunday evening we continue our four-part series from the book of Proverbs. Tonight we will be looking at anger in the book of Proverbs. Over the next weeks, we will be continuing in the series with the topics of relationships and folly as they are addressed in the book of Proverbs.

Last week Devon introduced us to the book of Proverbs in his sermon on communications. He said that “Proverbs are not simply short, pithy, statements which have popular appeal – rather, they are the declared Word of God, able to impart life to man.” Proverbs is rich in theology, though not comprehensive. Proverbs reflects themes found throughout scripture; bringing them to us on a practical level that we may apply in our daily pursuit of righteousness. They call upon us to reflect upon how we might apply divine principles to life situations.

Proverbs shows us what it is like to be a wise person or a foolish person. Tonight we will examine anger and how we may be wise or foolish in how we handle it.

Unbridled anger is the source for much outward acts of violence and inward roots of bitterness. Whatever stages our anger may have reached, we can take biblical steps to honor and glorify God in the situation.

Though we will struggle with angry feelings as long as we live, it is how we deal with that anger that determines its affect on us.

Righteous Anger

Would you be shocked to hear that, “The Bible is about anger. Who is the angriest person in the Bible? *God*. When God looks at evil, “His anger does not turn away,” as Isaiah repeated over and over. In Romans, Paul mentions God's anger and its effects more than fifty times, beginning with, “The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men” (Romans 1:18). John says that the wrath of God “abides” on whoever will not believe in the Son of God for mercy: anger was, is, and will remain on their heads!

That God is angry tells us something very important. Anger can be utterly right, good, appropriate, beautiful, the only fair response to something evil, and the loving response on behalf of evil's victims....” [*The Journal of Biblical Counseling*. Volume 14. Number 1. Fall 1995]

God Expressed Righteous Anger

God expresses His glory and mercy through His righteous anger. Here are two quick examples of God's righteous anger with different outcomes.

In Exodus 32:10 the people of Israel “corrupted themselves” when they made a golden calf and worshipped it and sacrificed to it. God was so angry that He wanted Moses to “...let me alone, that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them...” but God chose to show mercy and not destroy them.

In Ezekiel 23:25 God’s anger at Judah’s sin prompted His bringing Babylonians and others to deal severely with her. The passage sets forth how Judah’s companion nations were the instruments of her judgment.

Jesus Expressed Righteous Anger

Jesus experienced anger and yet did not succumb to sin. We can share in His triumph for He lives within us to help us. We do not have to be helplessly swept up in the surge of angry feelings. Our new relationship to Christ gives us hope and power to deal righteously with anger's sudden attack and dispose of its lingering toxin.

Jesus said a lot of controversial things during his life. One of the things he said was that anger is a form of murder. Jesus said, “You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder, and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment...” (Matthew 5:21-22).

Jesus knew that murder was the fruit, but anger was the root. And although not all anger ends in violence, all violence grows out of the roots of anger. Jesus knew the only way to confront the fruit of violence was to root it out where it starts, as anger.

But it is one thing to know that; quite another to actually root anger out of our lives. Everyone has anger; it’s a universal emotion. We must learn to deal with our anger in a way that honors God.

We Can Respond with Righteous Anger

God’s Word tells us that we need to be self-controlled in our anger. “In our union with Christ, the power of sin over us has been broken, and the Holy Spirit who dwells in us battles with our sinful nature on our behalf.” [*Lost in the Middle*, p.204, Paul David Tripp] We can, like others sited in the Bible, respond correctly in our anger.

“He” [God] “speaks fully and frequently about the alternatives to sinful anger: trust, forgiveness, patience, contentment, the pursuit of justice, godly confrontation, all the varied strategies and attitudes of peacemaking, self-control, self-knowledge. Righteous anger is an excellent and constructive thing. Moses, Samson, David, and Paul, like Jesus, on occasion burned with this most rare righteousness:” [*The Journal of Biblical Counseling*, Volume 14. Number 1. Fall 1995]

Of all our emotions, anger is perhaps the rawest, strongest, and potentially the most destructive. While the Scriptures tell us that not all anger is sin. "Be angry and do not sin;" (Ephesians 4:26), it is not surprising that anger is mentioned as the precursor of sin throughout the Scriptures.

Sinful Anger

Let's look at the same question we asked before from a different perspective. "Who is the angriest person in the Bible? *Satan*. His anger, also, does not turn away. He has "great wrath," being a "murderer from the beginning" even until now. Satan's anger springs from malice and the desire to hurt people. His anger, the paradigm of all sinful anger, is the antithesis of God's. Satan's hostility aims to make things wrong, in service to his own cravings. This also tells us something very important. Anger can be utterly wrong, bad, inappropriate, ugly, a completely destructive response. Such anger summarizes the very essence of evil: "I want my way and not God's, and because I can't have my way, I rage."

It is a curious and often confusing thing that the same word, "anger," speaks of both the finest and the foulest feelings and acts..... Sinful anger usurps God and does harm; godly anger loves, enthroning God and doing good to people." [*The Journal of Biblical Counseling*, Volume 14. Number 1. Fall 1995]

God Wants Us to Purge Anger from Our Lives

God says that anger must be removed from our lives. It is not an option. Colossians 3:8 says "you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice..." Ephesians 4:31-32 is just as emphatic, "Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you..." Let's look at nature of anger from God's perspective.

God Finds Anger Disgusting

God finds anger disgusting. In Galatians 5:19-21 anger is listed in the midst of sins that are repulsive to a righteous God; like sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, etc. When we get sinfully angry it opens the door to other sin in our lives. Proverbs 29:22 tells us that --"A man of wrath stirs up strife, and one given to anger causes much transgression."

The Hebrew word translated "wrath" here is a graphic word. The Hebrew word literally pictures a person's nostrils flaring. This word describes more than irritation, but its red hot anger. This is white knuckled, wild eyed, sweating palms, bulging veins, clenched teeth kind of anger.

The angry (hot tempered in some translations) person is just as picturesque a term as "angry" in Hebrew. The word for "hot tempered" literally means "full of poison" or "full of venom." Like a snake with fangs full of lethal venom, the hot tempered person is full of poisonous venom just waiting to spill out. This kind of person commits lots of different kinds of sins, because anger blinds us with rage.

When we don't learn wise ways of dealing with our anger, it bubbles up in ways we don't like. And once it starts to bubble up, it's like a boiling pan of water that keeps pushing the lid off. Once we open the door, we suddenly find ourselves doing things and saying things we never imagined possible. We hear words coming out of our mouths that in other circumstances would make us ashamed. We strike with our fists; throw things, scream and yell.

This of course was Jesus' point (in Matthew 5), that unresolved, uncontrolled anger eventually produces the fruit of violence. Uncontrolled anger opens the door.

God Says Uncontrolled Anger is Sin

So now that we understand better what uncontrolled anger does, how can we deal with it wisely? In Proverbs 29:11 God sees angry men as fools, "A fool gives full vent to his spirit" and contrasts it the response of a wise man that "but a wise man quietly holds back." Anger becomes sin when it is allowed to boil over without restraint, resulting in a "sawed-off shotgun" consequence in which everyone in earshot is hurt, leaving devastation in its wake...often with irreparable consequences.

Like many of the sayings in the book of Proverbs, this saying contrasts the foolish person with the wise person. The person who ignores the grain of God's wisdom gives full vent to his anger. When this person gets mad, it comes gushing out. Think about the air conditioner in your car. When you turn on your air conditioner, and put the air on full blast, opening up the vent as far as it will go, it comes blasting out. That's what foolish people do with their anger. It comes gushing out full blast. Often fully vented anger comes out as yelling, shouting, profanity, outbursts, even violence.

But notice the contrast here: It's not that the wise person doesn't vent his or her anger. This proverb does not say, "A fool gives full vent to his anger, but a wise person never gets mad." The wise person may still become angry, but he or she keeps themselves under control. The wise person opens the vent slowly, in a God-honoring righteous manner.

Intense anger and rage are like a bomb, and when we give full vent to our anger, we light the fuse. Once the fuse is lit, it's really hard to put it out. In fact, it's often impossible to put the fuse out once it's lit. Many people report blacking out in a rage, not remember what they did. When they finally come back to their senses, they can't believe what other people tell them that they did. Violence, destruction, hurtful words, profanity; all come from angry explosions.

God Wants Us to Avoid Confrontation with Angry People

Proverbs 20:3, "It is an honor for a man to keep aloof from strife, but every fool will be quarreling."

This proverb is not telling us to avoid conflict at all costs. It's simply telling us that sometimes it's wise to avoid a conflict. A wise person—someone who lives with the grain of God's wisdom—knows when to avoid conflict, while a foolish person is quick to get in a conflict.

There are certain situations when it's best to simply avoid an argument. This is especially true when a person isn't open to correction. When a person is what Proverbs calls a "fool" you're likely to incite(or stir up) more anger (in you or them) by confronting that person. It is a wise person who learns when to avoid conflict.

Anger Damages Our Relationships with People

Look at Proverbs 30:33, “For pressing milk (or churning in some translations) milk produces curds (or butter), pressing (twisting) the nose produces blood, so pressing (stir up) anger produces strife.”

You need to know that the words “churn,” “twist,” and “stir up” in this verse are all the same Hebrew word. Proverbs gives us two images, the first of the churning of milk to produce butter. The second is a person who walks up to another person and twists their nose until it bleeds. Some of you may have grown up with brothers or sisters who did that to you when you were young. Well in the same way, stirring up anger produces strife in our relationships.

We do also things to stir up anger in our own hearts or press others to be angrier when we are angry. When we dwell on what another person did to anger us, we stir up anger like churning milk produces butter. When we hang out with people who tell us we have every right to be mad, when we rehearse our revenge in our minds again and again, we’re stirring up anger.

Now according to this proverb, doing this produces strife. This word describes a quarrel or argument between people. We often say or do something that destroys relationships.

Just talk to a parent who in a fit of rage kicked his teenage daughter out of the house and hasn’t seen her in four years. Or talk to a wife who lost her temper and called her husband a loser and ever since there’s been a distance in their marriage. Just as churning milk produces butter and a twisted nose produces blood, so uncontrolled anger produces strife in our relationships. When the anger is gone and we’re calm again, the relationship is still damaged, seemingly beyond remedy.

Anger Leads Us to Say Reckless Things

This brings us to Proverbs 12:18, “There is one whose rash words are like sword thrusts, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.”

This is a contrast between the words that are spoken by a person whose anger is uncontrolled and the words spoken by a wise woman or man. Reckless words are like a sword, slashing and stabbing the other person. Whoever said, “Sticks and stones can break my bones, but words can never hurt me” didn’t understand the power of words. My body can heal from being hit with a stick or a rock, but my heart doesn’t heal easily from reckless words spoken in a fit of rage. Every fight I got into as a child came from reckless words.

These are just some of the things that uncontrolled anger does in our lives. These are all negative consequences, things we’d rather not have characterize our lives. I know very few people who want to open the door to sin in their lives, who want to damage their relationships, and who want to say things that they’ll regret later. Yet I could put up an open microphone up here, and have testimony after testimony from people in our church who have stories about this very thing happening. In fact, all of us have probably experienced these things to one extent or another.

Responding to anger — Dealing With Anger Wisely

Anger of course is simply an emotion; it is given by God. We are made in God's image; therefore it is natural for us, as human, to get angry at times. But how do we deal with anger? It's what we do with that anger, how we express it that determines whether we're wise or not. So let's talk about how we can wisely deal with anger.

Gentle Words Diffuse Anger

The practice of answering gently will for the most part reduce the chance of anger.

That brings us to Proverbs 15:1, which tells us, "A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger."

The word "soft" means "gentle" and "calm". When we get mad, our words turn harsh. We overstate the situation, using words like "always" and "never" to describe situations that are rarely "always" and "never" situations. We let sarcasm drip from our mouths as we cut and slice with innuendos. We might even resort to put downs, calling people "idiots," "morons," "jerks," and "stupid." Jesus said when we use those kinds of words; we're murdering people with our mouth. We're planting the kinds of seeds that grow into murder and violence when we call someone an idiot, or jerk, or stupid, or a moron. We might even use profanity, screaming and shouting words that we'd normally never use.

So we're told by this proverb to use a gentle answer. A gentle answer doesn't tell the other person what they want to hear, but a gentle word is a soft answer, an answer that is soft in tone and in content. There's no sarcasm, no disdain, no hatred. A gentle answer is a sincere word, a caring word.

Now a gentle answer doesn't always diffuse anger. This is not a guarantee or a promise. The sayings in Proverbs are generalizations, observations about what works most of the time in life. Proverbs is telling us what will diffuse anger most of the time. When we're getting mad or when we encounter an angry person, we're wise if we use gentle words to help diffuse the anger.

Patience – The Contrast to Anger

We need to have patience when dealing with anger. In Proverbs 15:18 we see that, "A hot tempered man stirs up strife, but he who is slow to anger quiets contention." In 14:29, "Whoever is slow to anger has great understanding, but he who has a hasty temper exalts folly." And, in 16:32 "Whoever is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and he who rules his spirit than he who takes a city."

Anger and rage are contagious. One person's anger can stir up anger and rage in other people. Just think about road rage, how it spreads from one driver to another, to another. We saw earlier in Proverbs 29:22, "A man of wrath stirs up strife, and one given to anger (a hot tempered) causes much transgression." refers to a person who's full of poison or venom. The picture is a snake whose venom sacs are full and ready to poison someone with a bite. This is what happens to us when we get enraged, we become venomous, poisonous. We stir up the situation.

But it's the patient person who brings a sense of calm to a tumultuous situation. The Hebrew word for "patience" means "long suffering." In fact, the Hebrew word literally means "long of nose." If anger and rage refers to a person's nostrils flaring, the "long suffering" person is "long of nose" in the sense that it takes a lot to get their nostrils to flare out in rage. In the Bible, patience is not resignation, giving in to your circumstances. Patience is a positive attitude of active endurance, of bearing up under difficult circumstances. You could translate the New Testament word for "patience" as staying power.

Remember the story of the tortoise and the hare? It was the tortoise who had the patience, and this led the tortoise to win the race.

Now how do you cultivate the virtue of patience or "staying power" in life? There's a common joke among Christians that you should never pray for patience. Why is that? Because all of us know that patience is often formed in the midst of difficult circumstances that test our patience. If you pray for patience, God might bring a difficult boss into your life or a situation where you have to wait and endure.

Well you might not pray for it, but it is part of God's plan for your life to develop the virtue of patience in your life. This is because Jesus himself was a man of patience, a man with perseverance and endurance. And God's plan for you, if you're a follower of Jesus, is to transform you into the image of Jesus. So patience is on the agenda.

I don't know about you, but when I try to be more patient, I end up with less patience. Patience isn't one of those things we can just try harder to be. Wouldn't it be nice if a part of our brain that secreted endurance enzymes? But of course it doesn't.

That's why the Bible describes the virtue of patience as one of the fruit of the Holy Spirit in our lives. In other words, being empowered by God's Holy Spirit will produce patience in us. It's not something that comes from our own resources, but it's something that comes supernaturally as we surrender our lives to God and seek the empowering of God's Spirit. God also uses trials and difficulties to cultivate the virtue of patience in our lives. We might not always pray for these things, but they'll come, and when they do, patience is one of the primary character traits God is developing in us.

Think about the relationships with the people in your life; your wife or husband, boss, children, parents, teachers. Where is God working the most in your life right now? This is where your ability to express your anger appropriately will be tested. We are wise about anger when we develop the virtue of patience.

Do Not Respond To Anger with Anger

We must never take it upon ourselves to play god and exact punishment on our own when responding to anger. Romans 12:19 "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."" Proverbs 20:22 has a similar imperative, "Do not say, "I will repay evil"; Wait for the LORD, and he will deliver you."

The clearest gauge of whether anger is right or wrong in its expression is whether it acts to condemn or to offer help. We are called to put our faith in the fact that "Vengeance is

mine, says the Lord, I will repay" (Romans 12:19). Our anger is not meant to be punitive, to get even. It is meant to do good first, and obviously, to the victims or potential victims of evil. [*The Journal of Biblical Counseling*. Volume 14. Number 1. Fall 1995]

Be Careful When Choosing Your Companions

...Whether it is friends or your mate. We are creatures that mimic the behavior that our friends model.

“Habits, styles, and tendencies to sinful anger are easily acquired from others. Many children who had never thought of letting fly an angry curse-they had never even heard all the bad words-are surprised when one slips out a week after first riding on the school bus. Parental shock perhaps quickly nips habit formation. But later, when they live in a college dorm or land their first job on a construction crew, in a factory, or in the military, the four letter words creep in as all-purpose modifiers: "Pass the %\$#@! [‘fill in the blank’] butter" isn't usually learned at home.

By modeling, angry and hostile curses become routine ways to respond to the mildest frustration. With good reason the Bible says, "Make no friendship with a man given to anger, nor go with a wrathful man, lest you learn his ways and entangle yourself in a snare." (Proverbs 22:24-25). [*The Journal of Biblical Counseling*. Volume 14. Number 1. Fall 1995]

We Need to Get Over Anger Quickly

When anger does occur, you cannot let anger to cause you to sin; and anger should not be allowed to fester and turn into bitterness. The matter of provocation should be dealt with righteously and brought to a quick end. If we don't settle the sin quickly it will open the door for more sin. “Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil.”(Ephesians 4:26-27)

Conclusion

How can we wise in managing our anger? First we need to understand what anger does: Uncontrolled anger opens the door to sin, damages our relationships, and leads us to say reckless words. Then we need to understand how to deal with our anger wisely, by expressing it without exploding, by diffusing it with gentle words, by cultivating the virtue of patience, and by knowing when to avoid conflict.

One can properly handle anger by the following:

Recognize and Repent of Our Own Anger

Recognizing and admitting one's selfish anger and wrong handling of anger as sin (Proverbs 28:13; John 1:9). This confession should be both to God and to those who have been hurt by our anger. Nor should one minimize that sin by calling it “getting a little hot the other day” or by blame-shifting: “well if you wouldn't have acted the way you did...”

Look for God in the Trial

Seeing God in the trial. This is especially important when people have done something to offend YOU specifically. James 1:2-4; Romans 8:28-29; and Genesis 50:20 all point to the fact that God is sovereign and in complete control over EVERY circumstance and person that enters your path. NOTHING happens to you that He does not cause or allow. And as all of these verses share, God is a GOOD God (Psalm 145:8, 9, 17) and does and allows all things in your life for your good and the good of others! Reflecting on this truth to the point of where it moves from our heads to our hearts will alter how we react to those who hurt us deeply.

Leave Room for God's Wrath

Make room for God's wrath. This is especially important in cases of injustices, especially when done by "evil" men to "innocent" people. Genesis 50:19 and Romans 12:19 both share that we should not play God. God is righteous and just, and we can trust Him who knows all and sees all to do justly (Genesis 18:25).

Don't Return Evil for Evil

Do not return evil for evil (Genesis 50:21; Romans 12:21). This is vital to altering our anger into love. As one's actions flow from one's heart, so also one's heart can be altered by one's actions (Matthew 5:43-48)...that is, one can change one's feelings toward another by changing how one chooses to act toward that person.

Communicate

Communicate to solve the problem. There are four basic rules of communication shared in Ephesians 4:15,25-32:

Be honest and speak (Ephesians 4:15, 25). People can't read our minds, but speak the truth IN LOVE.

Stay current (Ephesians 4:26-27). Don't "sand bag," letting the list of what is bothering you build up until the "dam busts" and you lose your temper. Dealing with and sharing what is bothering you before it gets to that point is important. Keep a short list!

Attack the problem, not the person (Ephesians 4:29, 31). Along this line, one must keep in mind the importance of keeping the volume of one's voice low (Proverbs 15:1). Yelling is usually a form of attack toward the person.

Act, don't react (Ephesians 4:31-32). Because of our fallen nature, our "knee-jerk" reflex, our first impulse is usually a sinful one (verse 31). The time spent in counting to ten should be used to reflect upon the godly way to respond (verse 32) and to remind yourself how anger is to be used to solve problems not create bigger ones.

Solve Your Part of the Problem

Lastly you must act to solve your part of the problem (Acts 12:18). You cannot control how others act or respond, but you can make changes that need to be made on your part.

Overcoming one's temper is not something that is usually accomplished overnight. But with reliance upon God through prayer for help, Bible study, and reliance upon God's Holy Spirit, it can be overcome. As one has allowed anger to become entrenched in one's life by habitual practice, one must also practice responding correctly until it too becomes a habit replacing the old ways.

Let's Pray.