

Introduction

I mentioned last week that we are going to take a break from our study in Matthew for a few weeks. We have spent a number of months focusing on the Sermon on the Mount. Having reached the end of that sermon, I thought it would be a good time to change things up during the summer. We will go back to Matthew in September but for the next six weeks or so we are going to be dealing with common sins we struggle with in everyday life. It is my goal in these studies to equip believers with knowledge and strategies to pursue holiness. Specifically, we will address putting off the old self and putting on the new. So we start with Paul's instruction in Ephesians 4.

[Read Text; Pray]

I am going to date myself a little this morning, but here goes. How many of you remember the days of the leisure suit? I went shopping with my mom about 40 years ago to get some church clothes. Those were the days when people did more dressing up for church. Anyway, I came home with a mint green polyester leisure suit and a silk print dress shirt. It was Saturday night and I could not wait to wear that combination to church the next day. Not only was it new, it was cool! I thought I was really rockin' the wardrobe among the teenage guys at church. It is really kind of funny because what I thought was so cool and so sharp now looks absolutely comical to me. When fads disappear and you look back, you see with much clearer eyesight. Similarly, when a person comes to faith in Christ and one's sight is changed, behaviors that used to seem so acceptable and almost admirable now look ugly. It is because they are. When the leisure suit passed from style, it went out with a thud. And that's the way our old self with its old look needs to go out as well.

I. A New Life, a New Wardrobe.

Paul's epistle to the Ephesians is a concentrated, jam-packed exposition of the gospel of Jesus Christ. He starts off with praise to God for the mind-boggling nature of the good news. It began before the foundation of the

world. Those who come to faith in Christ in the present were chosen by God in eternity past. In chapter 2 Paul explains the working of God in bringing his elect to salvation. All were dead in trespasses and sins. But God raised his elect to life with Jesus Christ. They experience salvation by grace through faith in him. After explaining how God is making the believing Jews and Gentiles into one, Paul moves on to spend the remainder of the letter urging believers to live in a manner worthy of this great salvation they have received.

The summer series is going to focus on the fact that the wonderful salvation brought to every believer in Christ calls for a changed life. It calls for good works. It calls for a new wardrobe, so to speak. This is what Paul explains in Ephesians 4:17-24.

A. It is out with the old. By conception every human is a walking dead person. We are a spiritual sort of zombie. We are alive in body but dead in spirit and living a life that corresponds to that death. It is a condition of futility of mind, darkened understanding, alienated from God, ignorant, and hard-hearted. The kind of behavior associated with that spiritual darkness is ungodly. It is unlike God. Words that sum up that lifestyle are callous, sensuality, greed, and impurity. That is the old wardrobe. It is the former manner of life. Paul says believers in Christ are to put off the old self with its former and corrupt manner of life.

B. It is out with the old and it is in with the new. That former lifestyle is antithetical to God. It is incompatible with his son Jesus Christ. If you learned about Christ Jesus as he really is, then you know it. And so that old wardrobe, those old behaviors you used to wear, need to be thrown out. In their place we need to put on the new self. We are to wear behaviors that portray God, that display his character in true righteousness and holiness.

This life-long endeavor to put off the wardrobe of the flesh and to put on the wardrobe of the Spirit is one every Christ follower faces. And one of the aspects of the old self that we must put off is sinful anger. In Ephesians 4:26-27, Paul says, "Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil." In 4:31, he writes, "Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away

from you, along with all malice.” So this morning we are going to focus on the need for every follower of Jesus Christ to abandon anger. It is one of those sins we wrestle with daily.

II. So What Is Anger?

Anger is the seed of hatred and murder. It is emotional hostility within you which strikes out to condemn the object of that hostility. It is occasioned by circumstances or acts of persons which you find annoying or contemptible.

Anger first appears in the Bible in Genesis 4. Both Abel and Cain, the first two sons of Adam and Eve, brought offerings to the Lord. The Lord had regard for Abel’s offering, but for Cain and his offering, he had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his face fell.

Cain was fuming because his brother’s offering was accepted while his was not. It overcame his joy and it showed on his face. The Lord warned him to control his anger or it would master him. But he did not heed the warning. When they were in the field, Cain rose up and killed Abel. Anger is the seed form of bringing death to another. Anger is hostility and hate in infancy. If allowed to grow, it brings forth death. Anger is everywhere. Part of the evidence is the prevalence of murder in our society. I noticed the other day that Milwaukee has the thirteenth highest per capita murder rate among cities in the US. I remember a couple years ago when I was coming to church on Sunday evening for Knights of the King’s Table and police cars were speeding around like a nuclear bomb had gone off. All the sirens could not help but put fear in your heart. There had been a triple murder just down the street here. A young man had killed the three other tenants in his apartment building. In anger he was getting them back for how they had offended him. Anger is everywhere among human beings.

But God also is angry. Psalm 7:11 says, “God is a righteous judge, and a God who feels indignation every day.” Romans 1:18 testifies that the wrath of God is revealed against ungodliness and unrighteousness of men. God possesses emotional hostility towards those who sin. Therefore, we must conclude that anger itself is not inherently evil. If holy God is angry, anger itself is not sin. There must be a telling factor about anger that constitutes it either reprehensible or right. And there is.

The main difference is . . . the reason for it. God has wrath because of ungodliness and unrighteousness of men. Psalm 5:5 says God hates all evildoers. God's anger is inseparable from his justice. His concern is with the compromise of what is righteous by his own perfect definition. It is right that human beings should seek God, worship God, and obey the law of God. It is evil that they would not. Therefore, God is righteous to be angry with and hate those who reject him. And his righteousness is evident in the way he is angry as well. God is angry, but he is also slow to anger and abounding in mercy. His anger is under complete control. When God erupts to judge the world, he will not be flying off the handle. He will not be acting irrationally. He rather will be in complete control and his infliction of punishment will be steady and measured.

So to the extent that our anger is like God's, it is righteous. Jesus manifested this kind of anger when he drove the merchants and money-changers out of the temple. He turned over their tables and rebuked them because they had turned his father's house from a house of prayer to a den of robbers. It is right to have anger over the breaking of God's law for the sake of God. It is right to have anger at men who reject and disobey God. But it must be for the sake of God and not for the sake of me. And still even that anger has unrighteous ways of being expressed. For example, I can be angry because of the breaking of God's law, but if I behave as if I am not a law breaker also, then I am a self-righteous hypocrite. That is exactly the demeanor of the scribes and Pharisees of Jesus' day. In Romans 2, the Apostle Paul castigates the Jews who judge others as sinners supposing that they are somehow better. These condemn themselves.

Be angry and do not sin, says Paul to the Ephesians. Avoiding sin with regard to anger, however, is tough. It involves why you have it, how you express it, and how you handle it. In striving for holiness, we must wrestle against sinful anger. So what makes it sinful? Sinful anger occurs when my anger is centered on me. I am concerned about how another is treating me. I am concerned about fairness to me. I am driven by idolatry.

You can know your anger is sinful whenever any of the following is true.

1. When your anger is provoked because you do not get what you want.
2. When your anger is provoked because your will is violated.

3. When your anger is provoked because you want to preserve something you already possess.

And when either of these conditions is true, it is because YOU are at the center of what is important to you.

Part of our problem is that we often mix together offense at the abuse of God with selfish offenses as well. We then try to say our anger is directed at an act because it is an act against God. The trouble is it might also be an act that personally affects me as well, and then it is hard to tell which one is really driving my anger. I conclude that if you are one who tends to excuse your anger, you should examine yourself carefully. If God is the reason for and the model for righteous anger, then it will be very seldom that we can truly say that our anger is purely of that kind.

III. Does God take Sinful Anger Seriously?

A. You think? Let's consider Moses. Numbers 12:3 describes him as more meek than all the people who were on the face of the earth. A humble man was he. He was also a man who communed with God. But when the Israelites murmured again about no water, he lost his temper. This was the second time God was to bring water out of the rock. The first time the Lord had instructed Moses to strike the rock and he did. But on this second occasion, the Lord instructed Moses to bring water out of the rock by speaking to it. Moses' anger was apparent even when he addressed the people. "Hear now, you rebels; shall we bring water out of this rock?" And then Moses, instead of speaking to the rock, struck the rock with his staff two times." At that point the Lord informed Moses it was for this reason that he would not be leading the people into the land. He had not upheld the Lord's holiness before the people. So, does God take anger seriously? You know he does!

B. So serious is anger to God that he refers to it a number of times in the New Testament.

In Galatians 5 Paul lists the works of the sinful flesh. Among them he specifies enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, and things like these. And he warns his readers as he warned them before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of heaven.

In Ephesians 4, Paul classifies bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander among those characteristics of the lifestyle of the people of the world, unsaved people. It is part of what is to be put off as the wardrobe of the old man. It has no place in the lives of followers of Christ.

Colossians 3:8 says, "But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander . . . seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self."

And then there is James 1:19. "Know this, my beloved brothers, let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God." And James 4. You are fighting with each other. You are angry men. You are being friends with the world and enemies with God.

C. What is so wrong with sinful anger is it is obsessed with ourselves instead of God. We see an offense against ourselves as the reason for getting all worked up. We see an unmet desire that we have as a legitimate basis for a tantrum. We put ourselves in the place of judge of all the earth and we judge others without mercy. The same standard of judgment would condemn our very selves, but we overlook that fact. Moses would have legitimate reason for anger that the people were grumbling against God. But to display his anger before the people in such a way as though he was not a man himself who only lived by mercy or as though he was the main one wronged, this was selfish and arrogant, no matter how humble he might otherwise have been.

D. Another aspect of sinful anger that is so wrong is that it reflects a mistaken notion that we have rights— the right to be spoken to with respect; the right to be appreciated for what I do for others; the right not to be taken advantage of. God is the only one in the universe with rights. Human beings have no rights; we only have gifts: the gift of life, the gift of breath, the gift of sight. Human beings have sinned away any thought of rights. And if we have come to Jesus Christ to follow after him, he have even less claim to rights. We belong to him. We have been bought with a price. We are not our own. Any rights we might think we have belong ultimately to him, and it is up to him if we receive them. But when we

become sinfully angry, we are in essence saying, "but I have a right." It is simply not true. When we assert rights, we are making a claim that flies in the face of our profession to accept God's gift of redemption, his purchase of us from our sins to belong to him and follow Christ.

E. A third aspect of sinful anger that makes it so bad is this. When we are sinfully angry we put ourselves in the place of God. We translate an emotion reserved only for the mistreatment and rejection of holy God, the creator of all things, and apply it to ourselves. Our concern is that our will not his will be done. And that is another reason why anger is so bad.

F. But anger is also bad because of its destructive nature. It incites the anger of others and seeks their destruction. Anger at someone is the seed of hate and death. This is the explanation for Cain's murder of Abel. Angry his offering was not accepted while God did accept the offering of Abel, he hated his brother to the point that he murdered him. Jesus also makes this point plain in the sermon on the mount. The people by and large thought they had not disobeyed the sixth commandment unless they actually murdered someone. But Jesus set them straight. "Everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment." It is the seed sin of murder. Sinful anger violates God's law.

IV. Is there Any Hope?

A. It is a pretty bleak picture when we look at the nature and scope of anger. Not one of us has managed to escape from committing this sin. Think about the anger in your life. Think about the things for which you have been angry. Many of them probably seem to be little, but the sin is big. If we were to think only of our transgressions of anger, it would be enough to condemn us to the lowest hell. Every instance of sinful anger cries out for divine justice for all eternity. But there is hope! All is not lost because there is one who never had one instance of sinful anger. Even when we see him filled with zeal for the house of God, violently removing the thieves from the temple grounds, Jesus has no sin. He himself went to the cross to satisfy the just anger of God. He bore the righteous wrath sinners deserved. He took the penalty due sinners and paid their fine. And he did it to bring us out from under what we deserve and into reconciliation with God. You angry person, you can be forgiven of your sins today, if you

will humble yourself before God, repent of your sin and trust in the satisfaction Jesus provided on the cross. So there is hope for forgiveness.

B. But there is also hope for overcoming the sin of anger. Jesus died not only for the forgiveness of our sins but also for the purpose of granting us the freedom not to continue to walk in them. 1 Peter 2:24 says "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree in order that we might die to sin and live to righteousness." It is what Paul says in Ephesians, that we might put off the old self with the old wardrobe and the old ways and put on the new self with a new wardrobe and new ways. Jesus died so that we might put sinful anger to death.

C. So how is it done? Here is where we are going to be pointedly practical this morning.

1. It starts with repentance. We must admit and acknowledge sinful anger as sinful anger. We must confess it to God and forsake it, we must resolve to abandon anger. He will forgive and he will supply the victory, but here is where it all starts.

2. Second, there must be a renewed mind. Ephesians 4:23 says, "Be renewed in the spirit of your minds." I must embrace the truths of God's word about anger. What is sinful anger? Why is it so offensive to God? I have no rights. Sinful anger reveals and inordinate love in my life for something other than God. I must own up to these things. And I must own also that the new wardrobe replaces angry hostility with tenderness, mercy, patience, and forgiveness.

3. Then, third, we must become alert to the sinful impulses to be angry. The temptation to become angry, in my experience, feels a lot like being angry. The impulse is there, the question is am I going to give way to it or resist it. But it starts with alertness.

4. When I detect the impulse, I have a choice to make to walk in the Spirit or give in to the flesh. I must choose the Spirit. Pause. Pray even if for a moment. Prayer reflects dependence on God. Cry for help to God. He will give the Spirit to those who ask.

5. Do not act rashly. Do react slowly. Learn to ask yourself, "why am I angry?" Slow your thoughts down. What am I thinking that is wrong?" How does God want me to react? Ponder how to answer. Ponder how to react.

Proverbs 15:28 – The heart of the righteous **ponders** how to answer, but the mouth of the wicked pours out evil things.

Proverbs 10:19 – When words are many, transgression is not lacking, but whoever **restrains** his lips is prudent.

6. Now, act in accordance with the Spirit. Bring to mind scripture, like "the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God." James 1:20. Refuse to give yourself over to the impulse of the flesh. Choose patience, mercy, and kindness for the glory of God.

This is how you take off the old and put on the new.

Conclusion

You remember a few months back my brother-in-law died and I went down to South Carolina to minister to my family and be involved in the funeral. Gregg really displayed the grace of God in his life. I was talking with my sister in those days about some of the special memories of Gregg's godliness and she told me of a time when they were building a house and the builder was seemingly taking advantage of them. Every day it seemed was something new. Anna became upset because Gregg was dealing with the builder in such a patient way. She thought Gregg was being weak. She wanted him to get angry and let the builder have it, to stand up and be a man. But then the Lord led her to a verse in Proverbs. Chapter 16:32 says, "Whoever is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and he who rules his spirit than he who takes a city." Gregg wasn't weak; he was stronger than the mighty, and the way he ruled his spirit showed it. He had replaced the old wardrobe with the new and glorified the Lord by it. It is weakness that gives in to the flesh to be angry. It is by the power of God that we can control anger and abandon it, instead being patient and kind.