Wise anger management

Text: James 1:19-21

Rev. David Waldron

**Scriptures:** Romans 12:9-21; Genesis 4:1-8; James 1:1-25

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] Songs Chosen: 155, 94, 52, 295, 279

Series: Occasional

Theme: Managing anger righteously.

Proposition: Be wise – righteously control your anger

**Introduction**

When was the last time you were angry? Young children, perhaps with your brother or sister? Youth perhaps with your parents or each other? Husbands perhaps with your wife? Wives, perhaps with your husband? Workers with your boss? Bosses with your employees/ subordinates? Perhaps against God because life for us as not worked out the way we had expected. All of us have at some time been angry,

Just as the Scripture contains the accounts of much suffering from Genesis 3 to Revelation 20, so also, because of sin, the Bible could also be described as a book of anger from Genesis 3 to Revelation 20: the unrighteous anger of mankind against God and other people, and the righteous anger of the Holy God against unholy people.

Anger is nothing new- it started after the Fall: ‘*Abel also brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat portions. And the LORD had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So, Cain was very angry, and his face fell. The LORD said to Cain, “Why are you angry, and why has your face fallen?”*’ (Gen 4:4-6) Cain’s anger against God led to his rising up and killing his brother. Some 4000 years later James writes about wise anger management to Christians who have been dispersed {Acts 8:1 (Judea, Samaria); Acts 11:19 (Phoenicia, Cyprus, Antioch)}. Now approximately 2000 years after this letter written, we continue to live in an angry world. The newspaper, T.V., internet testify to this sad truth.

Our own hearts bring forth outcomes in our words and actions which reflect our anger. Psychology, anger management courses, or time-out, won’t fully assist with our anger problem. We need wisdom from God to help us. Let’s turn to that wisdom from the letter of James chapter 1 verses 19-21: “*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 that God requires. Therefore, put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls*”.

The ‘anger management’ instructions here can be summarised by these three points:

1. Slow down your response
2. Think about the outcome
3. Receive the wisdom of God
4. **Slow down your response (v19)**

It is sometimes said that “timing is everything” and whilst this is certainly not always true, it often applies to things like buying well into a financial investment, telling a joke effectively, mastering a sport or playing a musical instrument. Timing is critical in wise anger management, as James explains in verse 19: “*Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger”.* ‘This you know’ means ‘know this’…there is important information following. The wisdom of God teaches us to change the speed of our natural response to circumstances, situations, thoughts, words or attitudes which may provoke us to become angry.

Anger is always a response to some type of stimulus. When people say ‘you made me angry’ this is never true. However, it may be true that ‘you provoked me’ and as a result I became angry. The ultimate responsibility for the angry person always rests with them. We always have options as to how we will respond to situations in life, but we need sufficient time and understanding to be able to make a wise choice when we are provoked.

Wisdom is taking on the character of God, who is “*merciful and gracious,* ***slow to anger*** *and abounding in steadfast love*” (Psalm 103:8). The slowness of God in expressing his wrath evident in through the history of His patience towards Israel in the Old Testament times. For example, during the period of the kings prior to Israel’s exile. During the reign of Manasseh of Judah, an idolater who turned away from the Lord and worshipped every kind of pagan deity, devoted himself to witchcraft even sacrificing his own sons, the great patience of the Lord finally ran out. God had been slow to anger over a period of many years. His carefully measured response finally comes in the form of His righteous judgement; as He reveals through His prophet Jeremiah: “*Though they fast, I will not hear their cry, and though they offer burnt offering and grain offering, I will not accept them. But I will consume them by the sword, by famine, and by pestilence*".

When we are angry, we must slow down our response just like God does. Our natural response can be to react immediately; to lash out in words and/or actions. We can bypass our mind by responding too quickly. We tend to blurt out our first thoughts and express them outwardly. Instead the Lord instructs us to slow down and to “*be quick to hear*”. Listen carefully. The word ‘hear’ has the sense of “giving heed to” or “understanding”. Be slow to anger. ‘Slow’ here has the sense of being delayed, of hesitating.

It is interesting to notice that the Word of God doesn’t say “never be angry”. The implication is that anger may be justified in some cases. The Scriptures do not forbid anger, but they do regulate how we are to be angry. For example, just as James does in our text, the Proverbs express the wisdom of slowing down our response. “*Whoever is* ***slow to anger*** *has great understanding, but he who has a hasty temper exalts folly*” (Prov 14:29).

Think about Christ when He came to the temple in Jerusalem and found ‘*those who were selling oxen and sheep and pigeons, and money-changers sitting there*’ (John 2:14). He took the time to make a whip of cords before driving them out of the temple. He rightly understood what they were doing and what the appropriate and wise response was. His anger was righteous as He fulfilled the words of Psalm 69:9 “*zeal for your house has consumed me*”.

How about you, do you respond wisely when you are provoked? Do you sometimes immediately fume, rant and rave? When we act this way, the Bible plainly teaches us that we are being fools who lack wisdom: “*A fool gives full vent to his spirit, but a wise man quietly holds it back*” (Prov 29:11). The wise person thinks about the outcome of their anger, which brings us to our second point.

1. **Think about the outcome (v20)**

Venting your anger can bring a type of personal relief, especially when we are convinced that doing so is fully justified. Being quick to become angry is also generally easier than slowing down your response. So why bother exercising self-control? The answer is because there is always a spiritual outcome to our actions which express our anger. This is true whether the anger is righteous or unrighteous, wise or foolish.

When anger is not controlled, when responses are not carefully considered before acting, then the result is almost always damaging. We don’t have to look far to see that this is so. Anger regularly erupts into domestic violence in New Zealand homes with irritate, annoyed, frustrated, and/or intoxicated fathers, mothers, and children. Tensions and divisions are sadly also all too common within covenant families in churches. Relationships between believers, like that of Euodia and Syntyche in the Philippian church who ‘*could not agree in the Lord*’ (Phil 4:2) are troublesome.

Sometimes anger is not ‘hot’ with outbursts of rage, but ‘cold’ with a simmering resentment which poisons relationships and causes brothers and sisters in the Lord to live like strangers. These things ought not to be so. Marcus Aurelius, the Roman Emperor and philosopher who ruled in the 2nd century AD knew the damaging results of uncontrolled anger. He wrote “*How much more grievous are the consequences of anger than the causes of it*”. However, this worldly wisdom only identifies damage at the human level; there is much more.

There are spiritual consequences to anger as James explains *“the anger of man does not produce the righteousness that God requires”.* When he writes this in verse 20 about “the anger of man”, he is referring to the anger which is characteristic of mankind. This is sinful/unrighteous anger. It is like the anger of Moses when he struck the rock twice instead of simply telling the rock to yield its water, as the Lord had commanded him (Num 20:8, 11). After years of constant service and patience with the discontented Israelites, Moses ‘lost it’, speaking in anger “*Hear now you rebels, shall we bring water for you out of this rock?*” (Num 20:10). The result was the righteous judgement of the Lord on his servants Moses and Aaron: "*Because you did not believe in me, to uphold me as holy in the eyes of the people of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land that I have given them*" (Num 20:12). Moses had not slowed down his response. He had not thought about the outcome of his angry words and actions.

You see “*the anger of man does not produce the righteousness that God requires”.* Sinful anger does not produce/achieve/workout the righteousness of God, that is the righteous life which God desires of us. This truth is found elsewhere in Scripture for example: “*A man of wrath stirs up strife, and one given to anger causes much transgression*” (Prov 29:22). ‘One given to anger’ describes a hot-tempered person whose quick uncontrolled anger leads them to sin.

Clearly, not all anger is sin. We’ve already looked at the measured righteous anger of Christ in removing the traders and moneychangers from the Temple. Jesus was also angered by the attitude of the Pharisees who, seeking a reason to accuse Him, had no concern for the well-being of a man with a withered hand. Gospel writer Mark records of Christ: ‘***He looked around at them with anger****, grieved at their hardness of heart, and said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was restored*’ (Mark 3:5). Despite His righteous internal anger and grief, no words are recorded to have been spoken by Jesus. There was certainly no unrighteous outburst against the hard-hearted Pharisees.

In contrast, for most of us, much of the time our anger tends to be unrighteous. The unrighteousness may be in the motivation of our anger, perhaps self-interest, pride or hatred; and/or the unrighteousness may be in the expression of our rage in an uncontrolled outburst or a cold withdrawal. Thinking about the spiritual outcome of our anger helps us to commit to resolving our emotions righteously and in so doing not remaining enraged.

As Paul writes to the Ephesians: “*Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger*” (Eph 4:26). Remaining angry damages our relationship with God and with other people in addition to harming ourselves. This is why the writer to the Hebrews calls for righteous action: “*Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no "root of bitterness" springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled*” (Heb 12:14).

So, the next time you experience a provocation to become angry:

* **Firstly**, slow down your response. Taking a few deep breaths or removing yourself from the situation for a time may help in this.
* **Secondly**, think about the outcome, not only from a human perspective, but spiritually. Consider the effect on your relationship with God, with others and also on your own body and soul.
* **Thirdly**, receive the wisdom of God from His Word.

1. **Receive the wisdom of God (v21)**

Human anger is a powerful response to provocation, but it is not as potent as the gospel which is ‘power of God’ for salvation. The gospel is the good news that the righteous anger of God against all His chosen people has been fully satisfied through the death of his own beloved Son, Jesus Christ (e.g. 2 Cor 5:21). The gospel is the good news that the perfect righteousness of Christ who was never sinfully angry has been credited to all who have faith in Him as their own Lord and Saviour. To have faith in Christ is to believe that He lived for you and died for you and that in turning away from your sin and turning to Him you have true life. The gospel is also the good news that God not only saves people like you and me by declaring them to be righteous in His holy sight, but that He also works to sanctify them by changing them progressively through the work of the Holy Spirit to be more like Christ.

This is the salvation of which James writes in verse 21. Because the sinful anger of mankind does not produce the righteousness of God, James writes: *Therefore, put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls*”. To deal with unrighteous anger, we must first put off the old sinful nature. The Word of God prescribes the spiritual medicine/surgery we desperately need. With some medications you need to ensure that you haven’t consumed alcohol before taking them. If you are undergoing surgery there is a need for a clean, sterile environment in the operating theatre before opening up your body. Verse 21 teaches us that some preparation is needed before the Lord’s cure for anger can be effectively received. This spiritual preparation is the putting aside/throwing aside/taking off (like clothing) the filthiness that is moral uncleanness (e.g. Zech 3:3-4).

To recognise that we need cleansing, requires humility. You can’t begin to address a problem until you accept that it is real. Seeing yourself as you truly are is humbling. Remember the prophet Isaiah after he was confronted by the holiness of God? "*Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips*” (Isaiah 6:5). When the human heart is so prepared, truly humbled before God, the cure can be received; the Word of God is effectively implanted. Here James likens the Word to a seed, just as the Lord Jesus Christ described it in the parable of sower.

* This seed must be implanted firmly – not snatched away by evil one.
* This seed must be implanted deeply – not succumbing to trials or persecutions.
* This seed must be implanted cleanly – not choked by worries and cares.
* This seed must be implanted richly – into the fertile loam of a humble heart.

When the Word of God is received this way, its power is unleashed into our lives. Power to save people like us from the eternal consequences of their sin, including the sin of unrighteous anger. Power to transform people like us to become people of peace, kindness and justice. People with the very character of Christ. Healing from unrighteous anger is possible for us because God managed His anger perfectly, proceeding at just the right speed, considering His planned outcome, providing the cure. Think carefully about how God manages His anger against sin.

He is **quick to hear:** He looks at the motives of men; understanding us as we truly are. “*The LORD sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart*” (1 Sam 16:7). He is eager to forgive: “*Turn back, turn back from your evil ways, for why will you die*” (Eze 33:11b).

He is **slow to speak**: with careful, deliberate words spoken patiently through His servants the prophets then through Christ His only begotten Son (Heb 1:1-2).

He is **slow to anger**: This is another one of His works of grace. “*The Lord is not slow to fulfil his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance*” (2 Pet 3:9).

The anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God, but the **righteousness of God** has worked righteousness for man “*For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God*” (2 Cor 5:21).

How has God worked His righteousness in us brothers and sisters? His own anger fell terribly/fearfully/completely on His Son at precisely the right time, achieving His goal, saving His people: ‘*Now from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land until the ninth hour. And about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" that is, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"*’ (Matt 27:45-46).

Brothers and sisters in Christ, God has managed His anger perfectly to save you. Will you then manage your anger through His power and grace according to His revealed wisdom?

Remember firstly to slow down your response; then, secondly remember to think about the outcome; Finally, to receive the wisdom of God, as James writes in verse 22: “*Be doers of the word, and not hearers only*”.

AMEN.