



Sermon

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God's Instructions and Example About Anger

John 4:5-42

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The Samaritan woman at the well had had a hard time of it in life. Divorce was far, far less common in first century Israel than it is now. There was huge stigma attached to it. That may be why she was not named in the text. I'd like to call her Miriam.

An independent, unmarried woman would have no protection or means of livelihood, so it was vital for a woman to have a husband committed to her. It is likely that even if one of those 5 husbands had died, Miriam may well have been also a rejected wife, divorced because of failure to produce an heir. Whatever the cause of her having a string of husbands, the result in her would probably be feelings of abandonment, rejection, frustration, helplessness and anger. It seems she tried 5 times to do it the socially acceptable way, but finally took what presented itself to her: life with a man to whom she was not married, who was not committed to her.

As we heard, she had a lively mind and a quick tongue. Miriam was knowledgeable about both her religion and the Jewish religion. A clever, defensive woman, she tried to avoid the gaze of Jesus' insight that could see her history, her longings - and her desire to slip out from under the challenge of his powerful words.

In her favour was that she was wanting an answer to life's difficulties, and secondly, she looked in the right place this time: by asking Jesus, "Sir, give me this water..."

How had Miriam dealt with her anger? She had bottled it. Her interaction with Jesus shows no angry outburst. She used it as fuel. Perhaps like this: "You, a Jew, and I, a Samaritan woman – how can you possibly ask me for a cup of water when Jews call 'unclean' any cup a Samaritan has touched?" And, "Are you greater than our father Jacob, who dug this well? It's 138 feet deep!"

The well, for her, held lonely memories of rejection, anger and despair. She asked Jesus for his living water so that she would not have to ever come there again. Even if we, like her, get the wrong end of the stick sometimes, Jesus doesn't punish us, but helps and guides us. He has subtle ways of speaking, but best of all, reveals himself to those who hunger and thirst after righteousness. He says, "I who speak to you, am the one you are looking for."

Jesus knew she was spiritually thirsty and he paid more attention to that than to her sharp words. Miriam's anger did not disqualify her from getting God's attention and help.

But sometimes there is anger within us that wants to burst out and it is not going to be a good result. And all those who advise on anger say it has to be restrained.

1. Restrain It

This is the key instruction. Proverbs 29:11 tells us that "Fools vent their anger, but the wise quietly hold it back." This scripture does not mean that the wise bury their anger or do not deal with it, but it means that they control their anger and the way they express it. When you restrain your anger, you keep it within limits and you only express it to the right person, in the right way, at the right time. This takes practice and mistakes are made along the way as we practice. Children need to be taught how to restrain their anger. When we are born, we do not have much capacity to make sense of the world or restrain ourselves. We have to learn first by being redirected, then restrained, and trained hopefully by loving parents. If they default, we may have to learn by hard circumstances resulting from our mistakes.

2. Repent of it

Repent means to think again and in this context to think along God's way of thinking, according to His truth. James 1:19-20 says, "*My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires.*" No matter how good it feels to vent our anger in spite or rage, no good will come of it. Righteousness is not just about our matching up to the standard God sets, but also includes rightly relating to people. We are put here on this earth among people and we have to learn somehow to get along with them without bloodshed! And bloodshed is where anger can lead to...remember Cain and Abel?

We've each got two ears to listen carefully, and one mouth to keep shut while the brain processes the situation. Keeping the mouth shut prevents us from putting our foot in it! An ounce of questioning is better than a pound of cure, especially if you are married to the person... Like: "When you said this..... did you mean that?"

God's way of approaching anger is to be slow to anger. There's some stuff that you need to let roll off of your shoulders and not allow it to get under your skin or cause reaction. When you think carefully about a person's words or actions, you may find that there's no need to get angry. Maybe the person was merely acting out of his or her own biases, and that is not a reflection of you. The anger speaks more about him/her than about you. I learned this when Ian and I were living with my mother-in-law after her husband died. Living with a grieving person can be tricky as they experience anger more keenly at that time: they are more thin-skinned than usual and can react sharply without the normal restraints.

But a really helpful thing she taught me at that time was giving people the benefit of the doubt. Countless times I heard her say something like, “Maybe she just had an argument before she left home.” Or, “Perhaps he’s in pain. Pain makes people irritable.” Or, “I may have mis-heard that.” Have you heard the true-ism, “Assumptions make an ass of you and me”? (Ass-u-me)

3. Rid Yourself of it

Colossians 3:8 says *“But now you must also rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips.”* It was all there in the first century. People are just the same.

To deal with anger God’s way, as soon as you feel it, take it straight away to God. Admit it to him, ask for his view of it. Give that time to emerge and allow your thoughts to be shaped by his. Ask for his help to deal with it and then release the situation to him. He is the only person fully qualified to be the judge. Your best course of action is to forgive the person and choose not to keep any IOU slips in your heart or mind. Those IOUs are for example, “She should have spoken more gently...” or “He owed me more respect...” Keeping those IOUs in your heart is just a recipe for bitterness and pain. Don’t let them have house room within you. And talk to God first before talking about it to anyone else. Rehearsing the insult and injury just reinforces it.

4. Replace it

Ephesians 4 is a very practical instruction on what to do with the old self, that is, the bad habits we used to practice without even thinking about it, when we weren’t Christians. Paul’s examples are stealing, lying, bitterness, rage, anger, and unwholesome talk. In verse 24 Paul instructs us to take off the old self like a coat and put on the new self, like a brand-new garment. If you have been a thief, start working and earn money to give to others and bless them. In the case of anger, don’t just put a cork in your mouth to stop anger spilling out, but rather, don’t let it build up until it spills out. Those instructions are in verses 31 & 32.

“Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ, God forgave you.”

First, recognise what you are doing. A time-honoured way to do this was practiced by the early church fathers. Examine your behaviour on a daily basis, for example, just before sleeping. That way, you clean up the messes of the day and they don’t build up like sludge in your heart. Face any angry reaction. Trace the cause of your reaction; don’t focus on the other person, but ask the Lord what is in your heart that makes you sensitive. Repent for any sin God identifies in you and ask his wisdom as to how you can retrieve the situation. Receive his grace and be thankful. These are the actions of someone becoming emotionally mature and becoming a Godly,

righteous person. Remember, the word “righteous” is not just a description of a goodie-goodie, but someone who relates rightly to others and to God.

But what if anger you don't deserve is directed at you?

Anger rises up within people, but we are not supposed to spew it out willy-nilly over anyone who happens to be there. That kind of use of anger is like opening a bottle of acid and spilling it over people. Equally, holding it in and never acknowledging it or dealing with it is like swallowing the bottle of acid. It eats you up inside. It causes physical problems as well as emotional and spiritual ones.

So the person who has vented his anger on you did not know about a better way to deal with it. He is to be pitied. He isn't operating in a mature, loving way. Here is an opportunity for you to demonstrate maturity in the way Christ taught us. Jesus says, “Bless those that curse you. Pray for those who treat you badly.” The problem is that there are so many people out there who are hurting inside and “hurting people hurt other people.” To vent their anger. To ease the pressure inside them.

In Romans 12:21 we are instructed, “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” This requires self-control. So take control. Don't be pushed around by your feelings. Be the strong one who blesses when he is cursed. The self-control need not be something we have to work up with gritted teeth. It comes from Jesus. We can pray before we get to work or in whatever situation, “Lord, express your life through me,” and he will give you what you need. When we turn to Christ, he comes to live within us by his Holy Spirit. Self-control is a fruit of the Holy Spirit. Asking him to baptise you in the Holy Spirit is a significant help, too. That gives you a power-boost towards righteousness.

My husband is very good at putting into practice the first part of Proverbs 15:1 “A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.” His strategy for responding to any whacky idea I come up with is: “You may very well be right, dear.” It's an “in-house joke” and we both recognise it...

As we ponder the history of our own, personal way of dealing with anger, the best place to go is straight to Jesus. “Sir, give me this living water. Give me Your water of life that refreshes, and cleanses. Wash away all the guilt and the accusations that other people have splattered me with.”

Jesus didn't give radical teaching about anger to leave us stuck in it. There are more keys to successfully conquering our anger and coping with others' anger. Stay tuned, because next week, I want to look at hidden roots that are the fuel that feeds those flames of anger that rise up. Jesus saves us from being captive to our emotional reactions and stored memories, to be free to follow Him. I believe that like Miriam, we can be healed and set free from the guilt of ruined relationships.

All scriptural quotations are taken from the *Holy Bible: New International Version*.