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Sermon

Anger Part 3: Hidden Roots of Anger

James 1:19-26; Matthew 18:21-35

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As disciples of Jesus, we are seeking to become like him. We want to please him because we love him. He loved us first and proved it convincingly, by taking the initiative of coming to us and by suffering for us. When we love someone, we make their desires a priority, so as disciples, we try to do what God wants.

One of his desires for us is in James 1:19-20:

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.

So if anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires, which is the state of relating rightly to God and people, we must put anger aside; get rid of it. Last week we talked about restraining anger, repenting and re-thinking the situation, getting rid of anger and replacing it.

The instructions James gives us imply a number of things. When he says we should be quick to listen, that means I am going to hold back my own opinion in order to listen to the other person. I am going to ask clarifying questions to find out why s/he speaks the way s/he does; and the background that has produced the opinion. I am going to attend to the body language as well as to the words. Being quick to listen also means putting aside my own assumptions based on how I would be feeling if I said that sort of thing.

Being slow to speak means pressing the “pause” button, and doing a quick internal check on whether my anger is based on me wanting my will to be done. However good our intentions might be, there is always the possibility that *our* will might not be the right thing at this time.

Being quick to listen means becoming something like a detective. You have to keep your eyes and ears open to spot clues, small inconsistencies, small comments that don't seem to fit with the rest of the story. Being quick to listen also means trying to avoid our preconceived ideas and opinions from colouring what is actually said and done. That's hard. It takes practice and perseverance.

When I was first married, I was surprised at how slow Ian was to make decisions. In contrast to him, my habit was to just line up the options, 2 or 3 at most, and I would choose between those

few things. He would do all sorts of time-consuming research and line up as many options as possible.

It was SO annoying, because I wanted the decision made and the ends tidied up as soon as possible. It took us a while to work out that he should do the research and I should help him make the final leap of decision. So I had to wait, be patient and listen carefully to his research. Then we could move ahead with confidence and unity.

That's righteousness: rightly relating to one another. I had to stop jumping the gun and stop speaking before knowing all the facts. Being quick to hear and slow to speak. I had to accept the way he made decisions and work in with him. Quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to become angry. That pleases God as well as the other person.

I was learning how to line up my behaviour to James 1v19. And James goes on, "Human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires." God, like any other parent, wants his kids to live together in harmony with Him and the people around us. But not all anger-producing situations are so simple to resolve. We are all flawed human beings, and our weaknesses and the other person's strengths do not always dovetail neatly. We can strive to be as patient as we can, but still may have to deal with someone who is as irritating as hell.

I use that word advisedly, because James is clear that not all arguments and problems have human origins. He says in verse 21, "get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you."

How do we get rid of moral filth and evil? First identify it, recognise it. We have to have a reliable standard by which to tell what is wrong and what is right. In the building trade, we have plumb lines and levels which tell the builder if some aspect of the building is truly vertical or horizontal. There are spirit levels and most recently, laser levels. The laser levels are pre-calibrated and certified for accuracy before they leave the shop.

We have instructions in the Bible to show what is morally right, and wrong or evil. The instructions were pre-calibrated and verified before they left God's lips! So reading the Bible and acting on the principles therein is vital to building our lives on the rock!

Making a habit of reading the Bible every day makes a huge difference to whether we can discern truth from error, and whether we can see something that looks good on the outside but has trouble attached to it. The Bible is like a laser level – it gives out light and is very accurate.

Sometimes we think we don't have to look in the Bible to see whether something is right or wrong, but it really helps with discernment. The prophet Isaiah quotes God saying, "My ways are not your ways, neither are your thoughts like my thoughts." It pays to check and not presume you know best or that you have no in-built bias.

When James says, "Humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you," he means, "Don't just *check* the spirit level, but build in accordance with it!" Don't be arrogant, assuming you know best. Take on board God's view as expressed in the Bible and internalise it. This can save you from so many mistakes and problems.

I have an example I go back to, because it was such a huge mistake and could have had such bad results. It was my first engagement, to someone I had fallen in love with. I got engaged because years before, at 16 years old, I had prayed, "Lord, don't let me fall in love until it's the right one for me to marry."

That sounded to me like a fairly good prayer, but it led me in the wrong direction, because it was based on the assumption that falling in love was the way you find out who to marry. That can lead to enormous problems, especially if you or the other person are already married, but even if that's not an issue!

I was young and needed to have my worldview shaped by God's word, the Bible. I needed my ways of receiving guidance altered. In the end, I paid attention to a verse which God gave me that spoke very clearly to the situation. I had searched for His will as the engagement went on, because my peace was growing less and less. And He spoke to me clearly, saving me from making a dreadful mistake.

James says, "Humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you." The Greek word for "save" here has the root "sozo", which can mean salvation of body, soul and/or spirit. God is showing us that we may need to attend to physical, emotional and spiritual influences as we seek to deal with the anger which affects us.

We all have these three parts of us that affect how we respond to irritating, anger-producing events. We are all aware that physically, for example, a lack of sleep or low blood sugar can make us irritable. We recognise that previous emotional hurt and stored-up unforgiveness can make a flare-up of anger much more likely.

But the spiritual dimension is one of the most over-looked components of an angry situation, because we can't see it and it can't be measured in a doctor's surgery. James tells us in chapter 4, "Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour." ...What signs and symptoms might the enemy of our souls produce if he has a foothold in us?

- ... A rush of disproportionate anger that pushes us to hurt or control the other person.
- ... An unholy sense of satisfaction as the other person recoils.
- ... The inability to escape from regret and guilt as you remember things.
- ... A numb emptiness and self-absorption, as someone's self-worth has been ripped away.

I'm not talking about a smell of sulphur here. I'm trying to help you recognise for yourself where someone, maybe you, might have allowed the devil a foothold, a place to work, which has led or will lead to the ruining of relationships. These and other signs and symptoms can be detected by something God has given us which is a bit like a litmus test, found in 1 Corinthians 13:

"Love is patient, love is kind and is not jealous; love does not brag and is not arrogant, does not act unbecomingly; it does not seek its own, is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong suffered, does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things."

The opposite of these things causes and is caused by anger, because they are not God's way. He wants us to be able to walk in peace, having a happy sense of being loved by Him and being able to give it away.

So James now instructs us:

Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues in it—not

forgetting what they have heard, but doing it—they will be blessed in what they do. Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves, and their religion is worthless.

Now a tight rein on your tongue does not only mean the self-control of not spitting out hurtful, angry words. It means a tongue able to choose to say things which bless a person who doesn't deserve it, which help people to see from another perspective, words to help and heal, not harm and hurt. A tongue able to be silent, under provocation.

James is telling us to take notice of the signs and symptoms in ourselves and our children that are problematic. He is urging us not to go away from sermons like this and say, "Well, I'm not as bad as so-and-so." He is calling us to take responsibility and make sure we submit our tongues to God. Keep praying for his help. Resist evil urges to kill someone else's pride, steal their reputation, or destroy their peace. With God's help, recognise where and when we need help, to get free of what has given the devil a free ticket to influence our lives.

James later says, "Submit to God," that means, in your mind and actions, agree with God. Then, "Resist the devil and he will flee." Jesus won victory over Satan on the cross. He is a defeated foe. Because we are in Christ, we can simply resist Satan and be a conqueror, not a victim.

Another hidden root of an anger problem can be a spiritual/emotional inheritance from our forebears. This can be dealt with in prayer and that will, by God's grace, remove the source and the fruit will disappear.

During this series, I have talked about what makes God angry. He is slow to anger because his anger is always tempered by love and true willingness to forgive and forget when we humbly ask his forgiveness. I have looked at some ways to master the anger that rises within us, as well as ways to not be crushed by any anger that is vented at us. Today, we have thought about hidden roots which make us more likely to react in anger and how to get rid of them.

I've brought to your attention words of Scripture, which if you hear and act upon them, will bring peace into your life. And if you need any help where you are stuck, that's what Ian and I and the pastoral care team are here for. Don't tell yourself, "Oh, they're too busy." We would count it a privilege.

And now let's take a moment to bring this to the Lord in prayer. Close your eyes. Remember that the Spirit of God is right here.

So now, bring to mind if there is any resentment, any anger, any frustration, maybe somebody who has hurt us, whom we want to hurt back. Let's submit to God. Paul instructs us in his letter to the Romans: "Don't be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

So now, God, would you free us now, from the toxicity of resentment and the crushing burden of guilt? Would you empower us to do what is right and not give in to what is wrong? Would you give us the compassion of those who have been forgiven by Jesus at the cross, and free us to operate with courage and grace today? We pray this for ourselves and for each other, in Jesus' name.

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

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