

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon series: Cultivating a Knack for Life

(Studies in Solomon's Proverbs)

Getting Good and Angry¹

(Proverbs)

Study #5

Introduction: Living on the edge of mad...

Last Sunday morning we considered Solomon's wise words in Proverbs about sexual intimacy. Next Sunday we're going to wrap up our time in Proverbs with a glimpse at what wisdom would say about money.

So, for those of you who are newer to Northwest and wonder if all we ever talk about around here is sex and money, this morning we're looking at the safe, comfortable, easy-going theme of anger.

Americans are angry. Likely as not, that's not "news" to you.²

We are angry at people who drive in the passing lane below the posted speed limit. And we're really angry at people who buy eleven items in the ten item line at H-E-B.

We may often not admit it, but at any given moment, lots of us are angry. Many of us who are angry are angry a good bit of the time.

¹ In the Appendix at the end of the manuscript I include several verses on anger for further study; then some thoughts on how emotions "work" in our lives that may shed light on how we can master our emotions rather than be mastered by them.

² Psychology Today, April 30, 2013 - "Americans are angry. There is a growing discontent in the nation. And it's getting worse. The shootings, the bombings...are not independent random events. They are symptoms of a much larger epidemic." Goal Auzeen Saedi, Ph.D.

Anger's a big deal. We spend significant time being angry and significant energy dealing with anger.

Frederick Buechner wrote this about anger:

"Of the seven deadly sins, anger is the most fun. To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll over your tongue the prospect of bitter confrontations yet to come, to savor to the last toothsome morsel both the pain you are given and the pain you are going to give back; in many ways it is a feast fit for a king. The chief drawback is that what you are wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton at the feast is you."³

Emotionally speaking...

Now the Bible, from beginning to end, deals as honestly with the world of emotions as it does with God, the spirit world, and Heaven and Hell. Accordingly, from beginning to end, the Bible speaks about the common and strong emotion of anger.

As well, given that anger is everywhere around us and in us, and given the challenges that anger presents, it is small wonder that it is addressed in the book of Proverbs.

Solomon wrote this book to equip us with the wisdom that will lead to a God-honoring life. So of course he speaks to an emotion that we encounter as regularly as anger.

This morning I think we'll find that the wise counsel Solomon and others offer with respect to anger will be really helpful.

Thinking About Anger...

Biblical "Anger Data"

If you were to conduct a Bible search for the words "anger" "fury" and "wrath" (as I have done) you would uncover well over five hundred references to anger in the Bible.

³ Frederick Buechner, Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC, Harper and Row

So, if you know yourself well enough to know that you struggle with anger, you should at least be aware that you're not alone. Those who wrestle with anger make up a big, big club.

You may not be surprised that lots of people are angry. You might be surprised at the number of times anger is attributed to God.

Of those five hundred references to anger in the Bible, way over three hundred of them deal with the anger (or the "wrath") of God.

Divine "Anger Data"

Old Testament

God became angry with Moses for not jumping at the chance to be His spokesman (Exodus 4). He became angry with the people of Israel for rebelling against Moses' leadership. Frequently, His anger was kindled when His people sinned and then His anger was turned away when they offered sacrifice (Numbers 14).

Scripture says repeatedly that God is "***slow to anger***" (Exodus 34), but there are dozens of times when His anger ignites into an inferno.

Some fifty times the Psalms reference God's anger. The prophets warned Israel and the surrounding nations of God's anger if they continued in rebellion.

And the anger of God is not just an Old Testament thing, either.

New Testament

In the New Testament both John the Baptist and Jesus said that "***the wrath [of God]***" was just around the corner (Luke 21:23; John 3:36). The apostle Paul said that same thing and so did John in Revelation, the Bible's last book.

So, since God *regularly* experiences anger I conclude that anger must not necessarily be, in and of itself, sinful.

In fact, we know it is not. Not only because it is something that God experiences, but because we are commanded, "***be angry and yet do not sin.***" (Ephesians 4:26).⁴

Among the very important things I'd like for you to hear this morning is that it is possible to be angry without being guilty of sin.

So, we search our Bibles and find evidence of God's anger. We also find plenty of people who are angry.

Human "Anger Data"

Angry - because of blocked goals

King Balak was angry when the false prophet, Balaam, refused to curse the nation of Israel for him.⁵ His goal of cursing Israel was blocked and wise counselors have long told us that a blocked goal can prompt an angry response.

Think about it. Do you get angry when things don't go as you have planned, when your goals are blocked?

When you have timed a trip perfectly so that you know you will arrive at exactly the right time for your engagement and then you hit every one of the seventeen traffic lights on Bandera Road exactly wrong so that you are now LATE, don't you get angry?

Blocked goals can prompt anger. Then, in three famous biblical episodes, we see how jealousy can lead to anger.

Angry - due to jealousy

Cain was jealous of his brother, Abel, because God accepted Abel's animal offering and did not accept his own grain offering. Cain's jealousy morphed into anger which led to the world's first murder.⁶

⁴ Paul includes anger in several lists of sins - 2 Corinthians 12:20; Galatians 5:20; Ephesians 4:31; Colossians 3:8. It would seem to me that he is not simply referring to the emotion of anger, but to an uncontrolled outburst of anger.

⁵ See Numbers 24.

⁶ Genesis 4

Israel's first king, Saul, was jealous of the young David's growing popularity after David killed the giant, Goliath.⁷ Saul's jealousy led to anger and he spent the last ten years of his life trying to kill David.⁸

Daniel tells us that the Babylonian King, Nebuchadnezzar, was jealous for the worship of the three Hebrew young men, (Shadrach, Meschach, Abed-nego). When they wouldn't bow before his golden image he turned angry and tried to have them put to death in a fiery furnace.⁹

We understand how this can work.

When a good friend gets a long-hoped-for promotion, you feel happy for her. But, occasionally, do you know the feeling of green-eyed envy and jealousy? Do you ever wonder about the fact that:
YOU didn't get the promotion?
YOU aren't moving to a larger home?
YOU aren't driving the newer car?
YOU aren't the one everyone's congratulating?

When you reflect on your seemingly stuck, static status, do you sometimes get angry?

Then again, anger can also rise up because we suffer a personal loss.

Angry - because of a wrong suffered

Just look at Jonah. He understood God to have promised the destruction of Nineveh, which was, at that time both the capitol of Assyria AND the greatest threat to his own nation, Israel. When God showed *mercy* to Nineveh, instead - which meant a continued threat to Israel - Jonah got mad.¹⁰

Do you become angry when someone has dealt with you in a way that you believed was unjust, said something that you took to be unkind and unfair, seemed to assume the worst about you?

The Hebrew word for anger is "*aph*," which is also the word for "*nose*." It implies that the nostrils are wide and flaring. When you suffer a personal wrong, does your nose get bent out of joint?

Then, of course, there are times when anger can be noble. Sometimes we become angry when someone else suffers unjustly or when we are confronted with the ugliness of the damage done by sin.

Angry - over injustice and sin

When Jacob's daughter, Dinah, was violated, her brothers (the sons of Jacob) were (justifiably) angry.¹¹

Moses was angry with the people of Israel for making and then worshipping the golden calf at the foot of Mount Sinai.¹²

When King Saul was out there trying to kill David because of jealousy, Jonathan, David's best friend AND Saul's son, became angry with Saul.¹³

Jesus became angry at people who didn't approve when He healed a man on the Sabbath, because it required what they wrongly defined as "work."¹⁴

There is nothing wrong with being angry over injustice, as this quote affirms.

¹¹ Genesis 34

¹² Exodus 32

¹³ 1 Samuel 20. And two more examples: When the prophet Nathan was trying to drive home to David a sense of conviction regarding David's sins of adultery and murder, he told a story that prompted anger in David toward the perpetrator of injustice in Nathan's parable. (2 Samuel 12) And when Nehemiah was governor of Judah under the Persians after Jerusalem had been destroyed and was in the process of being rebuilt, he became enraged at the exorbitant interest rates that were being charged by Jews against fellow Jews. (Nehemiah 5)

¹⁴ Mark 3, John 7.

⁷ See 1 Samuel 18.

⁸ We often refer to the insanity of King Saul. Was he jealous because he was insane, or did he become insane because he was jealous...?

⁹ Daniel 3.

¹⁰ Jonah 4.

*“A man who does not know how to be angry does not know how to be good. A man who does not know how to be shaken to his heart’s core with indignation over things evil, is either a fungus, or a wicked man himself.”*¹⁵

In Heaven, nothing will be ever be wrong with anything. Here, something is always wrong with everything. And that “wrongness” sometimes provokes the response of anger.

When we see injustice against the weak and the helpless, anger rages - and well it should. We get angry over personal violation, when jealousy rises up, and over blocked goals.

So...

How do we deal with the anger that rises in response to our broken world? Or in the words of the inimitable Fred (Mister) Rogers, *“What do you do with the mad that you feel?”*

Well, Solomon provides great wisdom for dealing with anger. In fact, he charts a course for us that will enable us to turn the energy anger generates into worship and love.

In a couple of minutes, we will look at the positives, the “do’s” of anger. But first, we’ll listen as Solomon - and other biblical writers - lists a couple of anger “don’ts”.

First, don’t spew. Here is one out of dozens of proverbs we could list that all say something similar.

Getting Good and Angry

When It Comes to Anger, DON’T...

...spew it

***[Proverbs 29:11] A fool always loses his temper,
But a wise man holds it back.***

Some people talk about having a hard time getting in touch with their feelings. Not this guy.

He’s mad. He knows it. You’ll soon know it, too. He has no problem letting fly with an outburst of his anger.

He’s not about to allow bottled-up anger to give him a stomachache or put him in a bad mood.

If he has to slam the door and kick the dog and curse his best friend - or God - in order to let off steam, he’ll do it.

Later, she may apologize. She might say, *“I just couldn’t help myself.”*

Solomon says that’s not true.

When we *“lose our temper”* (when we allow ourselves to be controlled by our emotions), Solomon says that we are acting foolishly.

We can’t blame genetics, personality, family of origin, or even severity of trial. When we make a habit of losing our temper, Solomon doesn’t give us an out. It is foolishness to blow up.

Whatever a God-honoring response to anger might look like, it’s not about thoughtlessly giving full expression to that anger.

And there is another “don’t” when it comes to dealing with anger. Solomon hints at it in Proverbs, but the Bible makes it explicit elsewhere.

If we are not to spew anger, neither are we to store it. Here are some words from a wise young man (Elihu) spoken to an older man (Job) who had plenty to be angry about.

...store it

***[Job 36:13] But the godless in heart lay up anger;¹⁶
They do not cry for help when He binds them.***

¹⁵ Henry Ward Beecher, a great preacher of a previous generation.

¹⁶ As opposed to dealing with it constructively

Stored away in denial

Anger may be stored because we are in denial about even being angry. In that case we “stuff” it.

The “stuffer” bottles up his feelings and denies to himself and to others that anything is wrong. Life’s disappointments and hurts don’t get to her!¹⁷

Some stuffers grew up in a home where they weren’t encouraged to express their anger. Maybe they were never taught how to “own” or express anger constructively as children. Some, sadly, have never learned how to constructively deal with and express anger, even as adults.

Stuffers may become pouters. When we ask a pouter what is wrong, what is the standard answer? “*NOTHIN’*.”

But that is dishonest. And when we’re dishonest about what’s going on inside we short-circuit God’s work in changing us into powerful, loving, worshiping people.

If the fact of the matter is that we are angry, integrity demands that we admit it, if to no one else, at least to ourselves and to God.

Yes, anger may be stored because we are in denial. Or, it may be stored because we’re savoring it.

Stored away to savor

As Frederick Buechner said (above), there can be an odd delight in being and staying angry. The patriarch, Job, was never in denial about being angry. He was angry and he knew it. And he had every intention of staying that way.

¹⁷ A tempting tendency is to escape unpleasant feelings with no regard for whether they are constructive or destructive. When a troublesome emotion surfaces, we look for a way to NOT feel it: say a quick prayer, recite a favorite verse, engage in physical activity, eat, watch a mindless sitcom, enjoy a distracting fantasy. Often the point of these activities has nothing to do with pressing on to maturity in Christ, but rather with wanting to feel better.

So, we might store up anger like we store money in a bank. We take comfort in it just being there. We can take it out and play with it whenever we want. But the return on investment earned by anger isn’t pretty.

There is no benefit to storing anger - either by denial or stuffing. What we will discover is that *anger denied* eventually surfaces somewhere; and that *anger stored* is retrieved, not as a delightful plaything, but as a monster.

Storing anger is a lot like burying toxic waste. When the canisters of poison are buried underground (usually just outside the city limits), everybody thinks the problem is gone.

But years later, folks who live near where the toxic waste was buried start getting sick. Their strange accumulation of symptoms is traced back to a contaminated water system and to those buried canisters of poison that have been leaking for years.

Denied or stored, anger always bubbles to the surface, and when it does it poisons BODIES, MINDS, RELATIONSHIPS, and SPIRITS.

- I have often wondered how many of our migraines, ulcers, and sleep disorders are caused by unresolved anger.¹⁸ Lots of counselors believe there is a strong link.
- Over the long haul, anger’s poison twists our thinking, erodes self-esteem, and breeds confusion. It leads to hopelessness, depression¹⁹ and mental illness.
- Hang on to anger and your relationships will suffer. Chronically angry people don’t play well with others. Hang on to anger and we’ll become irritable, unable to forge deep and lasting friendships.

¹⁸ When I repress my anger, my stomach keeps score - John Powell.

¹⁹ Many counselors believe that depression is the almost inevitable result of chronic internalized anger.

- And anger poisons a life with God. In Ephesians 4:26, the Apostle Paul writes of how important it is to deal with anger quickly. He says, **[4:26] *Be angry, and yet do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger...*** Then, he continues, telling the folks in the church at Ephesus, **[27] *and do not give the devil an opportunity.*** Catch that. Anger that is stored, over time, will exact a terrible toll. Stuffing and holding on to anger provides a foothold for our enemy. We invite his destructive ways and will suffer the loss of intimacy with God.

So, if we shouldn't spew and we shouldn't store, how do we wisely manage anger?

I find two wise ways to respond once we realize that we are angry, one from Proverbs and one from the life of Jesus.

First, we have to accept the challenge to gain control over our emotional life. We have to stop believing that our negative emotions - anger, fear, and all the rest - have to dictate our behavior.

Listen to Solomon's words about the importance of rising above our emotions.

When it Comes to Anger, DO...

...gain control over your spirit (see also Proverbs 14:29; 15:18; 19:11; 16:32; 17:27)

[Proverbs 25:28] *Like a city that is broken into and without walls Is a man who has no CONTROL OVER HIS SPIRIT.*

You may feel as mad as a hornet over some recent or long-past offense. Any of us might want to rip someone's head off with a cutting remark, take revenge, or spread ugly - even if true - gossip around town about the one who has done us dirty.

If we are wise we will be growing in our capacity to act counter to what our emotions would prompt us to do.

Wisdom *requires* that we not "fly off the handle." And wisdom *promises* that it is possible to not "fly off the handle."

Being "***slow to anger***" (as many verses in Proverbs urge) implies that, yes, there may be legitimate cause for the anger you feel. And, there may be a context in which you can and should express your anger.²⁰

However, as you experience that anger-producing event, if you are "***slow to anger***," you will wait for just the right moment to express your anger in just the right way.²¹

We are not slaves to our emotions. The freedom to act independently of our emotions is part of the freedom we can enjoy in Jesus.

In Galatians 5, the apostle Paul lists the various fruits of the Holy Spirit. The final fruit he mentions is "***self-control***." When we are relying on the Holy Spirit and walking with the Holy Spirit, we will be marked by "***self-control***."

Second, as we honestly admit to ourselves and to God, "*Yes, I'm angry!*", we will determine to express our anger only WHEN and IF and IN WAYS that further His purposes.

Submit the expression of your anger to the purposes of God

We should never deny that we are angry.

Rather, we should be careful to note when we are angry, and pay as careful attention to that flashing red "anger" light as an observant driver does to the gauges on his car's dashboard.

When anger is present, it is a sure sign that something is wrong. It could be that there has been injustice observed or suffered. There could be a blocked goal. There could be a serious loss. We may be tempted toward jealousy.

²⁰ Speak when you're angry, and you'll make the best speech you'll ever regret - Laurence J. Peter (Leadership, Summer, 1986, p. 47)

²¹ Aristotle, echoing the wisdom of Solomon, said, "*Anyone can become angry. That is easy. But to be angry with the right person, to the right degree, at the right time and in the right way - that is not easy.*"

None of us get angry “for nothing.” There are always reasons for our anger. We are to “own” our anger and to understand what has prompted it. We disregard the “anger light” at our peril.

Then, at that very instant, while choosing to own our anger, we consciously submit to God. And what that means - in the moment! - is that we determine, by the grace of God, to act and to speak in ways that honor God.

That’s what Jesus did.

There were two times in Jesus career when He cleansed the Temple in Jerusalem because of abuses of justice going on there. Both times it is clear that He was angry, although the Bible doesn’t come right out and say it.

One of those cleansings occurred on the last week of His life. The other was much closer to the beginning of His ministry.

But this was certainly not the first time He had seen the injustices going on in the Temple. He had been going to the Temple every year for His whole life. He’d seen the buying and the selling and the profiteering dozens of times. Think of all the times He saw the scene and did nothing. That’s “*slow to anger*” in living color.

He was waiting until just the right time - and the exact right time (John 2) has finally arrived.

Watch Him.

With absolute self-control He took time, while still angry, to weave a whip of cords. He used this whip to drive out the buyers and the sellers.

This isn’t flying off the handle. He quoted Old Testament Scripture while evacuating the Temple of the riffraff. He thought it through and determined what He would do - hang the consequences! - and expressed His anger by a dramatic act that honored God.

Conclusion:

As followers of Jesus, we are to do the same with our emotions.

- Don’t deny them but experience them to the full.
- Commit ourselves to God.
- Express our emotions in ways that honor God.

Over the past two weeks we have focused on an appetite (last Sunday - the sexual appetite) and an emotion (today - anger).

As we grow in wisdom we will not be mastered by either appetites (be they sex, sleep, or food) or by emotions. We will learn to rise above life’s appetites and strong feelings and live to honor God.

Appendix: Further reflection about anger

Part 1 - A Few Angry Verses

I submit these verses for your meditation if you are looking for a deeper exploration of anger. Heeding the wisdom found in the verses scattered throughout the sermon manuscript PLUS these listed here will help you gain God's perspective on anger and will be fodder the Holy Spirit can use to help you gain mastery of this powerful and potentially destructive OR productive emotion.

*[Psalm 37:8] Cease from anger, and forsake wrath;
Do not fret, it leads only to evildoing.
[Proverbs 14:17] A quick-tempered man acts foolishly,
And a man of evil devices is hated.
[Proverbs 14:30] A tranquil heart is life to the body,
But passion is rottenness to the bones.
[Proverbs 15:1] A gentle answer turns away wrath,
But a harsh word stirs up anger.
[Proverbs 19:19] A man of great anger will bear the penalty,
For if you rescue him, you will only have to do it again.
[Proverbs 21:14] A gift in secret subdues anger,
And a bribe in the bosom, strong wrath.
[Proverbs 22:24] Do not associate with a man given to anger;
Or go with a hot-tempered man,
[25] Or you will learn his ways,
And find a snare for yourself.
[Proverbs 29:8] Scorners set a city aflame,
But wise men turn away anger.
[Proverbs 29:9] When a wise man has a controversy with a foolish man,
The foolish man either rages or laughs, and there is no rest.
[Proverbs 29:22] An angry man stirs up strife,
And a hot-tempered man abounds in transgression.
[Proverbs 30:32] If you have been foolish in exalting yourself
Or if you have plotted evil, put your hand on your mouth.
[33] For the churning of milk produces butter,
And pressing the nose brings forth blood;
So the churning of anger produces strife.*

[James 1:19] This you know, my beloved brethren. But everyone must be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger; [20] for the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God.

Part 2 - Thoughts About Emotions

Initially, emotions are simply reactions to what life throws our way

PLEASANT EXPERIENCES PRODUCE PLEASANT EMOTIONS

God has made us to be *reactive* beings. In certain areas we react to our environment in ways that are entirely determined by what happens to us. The warmth of the sunshine on our face on a cool day produces a pleasant sensation. We like that sensation.

Normally, such a pleasant physical sensation is accompanied by a pleasant emotion of some sort - the feeling that all is well with the world, relaxation, contentment. We feel pleasure on the physical level and we feel "good" on the emotional level.

Likewise, unpleasant experiences produce unpleasant responses.

UNPLEASANT EXPERIENCES PRODUCE UNPLEASANT EMOTIONS.

An unprovoked slap on the face produces physical pain. That physical pain is normally followed by an unpleasant emotion - shock, shame and embarrassment, rage. We feel pain on the physical level and we feel "bad" on the emotional level.

Pleasant events usually generate pleasant emotions and unpleasant events generate unpleasant emotions. The initial emotional response is "knee-jerk." It is instinctive.

However, after time, emotions reflect choices we have made as to how we will interpret what life has thrown our way.

Emotions are, EVENTUALLY, choices as to how we will interpret what life throws our way

PLEASANT OR UNPLEASANT EMOTIONS CAN BECOME CONSTRUCTIVE OR DESTRUCTIVE

As author and counselor Larry Crabb has written (and I agree), *“EVENTS determine whether we [initially] feel pleasant or unpleasant emotions. “WE determine whether our feelings are [eventually] constructive or destructive.”* Let me see if I can illustrate.

If I get news that a friend has received a grim diagnosis from his physician, an immediate emotional response of shock and grief is probably unavoidable for me. Over time, though, those “bad” feelings will mutate.

They may become a calm, still sad, trusting reliance on God that will energize me to minister Jesus to my friend in his time of need.

OR, those emotions may become a raging spirit of bitterness over the calamity that has happened to my friend, which may also provide energy to care for him. In this case, however, that care would be absent a trusting reliance on God, and therefore absent the only motivation that would truly benefit my friend in the long run.

There is all the difference in the world in the two responses. What determines the difference? WISDOM, sourced in a fear of the Lord.

After the initial instinctive, knee-jerk reaction, the wise person chooses to interpret the disappointing event through a grid that says, *“God knows what is best,”* and finds energy to serve and love well, even while grief-stricken.

The foolish person chooses to interpret the disappointing event through a grid that says, *“I know what is best,”* and follows a trail that leads to independence from God.

In short, WISDOM leads to constructive feelings and then to constructive behavior. FOOLISHNESS leads to destructive feelings and actions.

The same unpleasant event that necessarily produces unpleasant emotions leads to either constructive or destructive emotions depending on the wisdom of the interpretation we bring to that event.

OUR EMOTIONS USUALLY BECOME CONSTRUCTIVE OR
DESTRUCTIVE WITHIN A VERY SHORT PERIOD OF TIME

It is my understanding of Scripture and my own personal observation, too, that our emotions will turn either constructive or destructive **very quickly** after we have experienced the initial knee-jerk emotional response. Just taking ANGER as our “for instance,” an initial response of anger to an offense of some sort is not necessarily sinful.

Paul’s admonition, though (Ephesians 4:26), that we should not **“allow the sun to go down”** on our anger points out that within the space of a few hours at most (and, I believe, potentially much sooner.), anger that wasn’t initially sinful can easily become sinful.

Likewise, anger that had no particularly constructive aspect can be turned constructive quickly if we submit our angry response to God.

What a tremendous motivation to gain mastery over our emotions, to turn to God in our pain, and then to see Him use even our painful emotions we experience to further His purposes.