

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, November 18, 2012**

**LIFE IN THE BODY:
DEALING WITH ANGER
(Part 2)**

**James 1:19-21;
Romans 12:16-21**

Are you angry today? Did you come to church this morning angry about something? Are you lugging around some anger over something that happened last week, or last year, or even last century?

If so, you have plenty of company. As I said last Sunday, anger is a fact of life. Everybody gets angry at one time or another. And it is not always a bad thing. If you never get angry about anything, there is something wrong with you. There are some things in this world about which we *should* be angry.

But anger can be, and too often is, an occasion for sin. So, in James 1:20, James says we should be “slow to become angry.” In other words, don’t fly off the handle. Don’t blow your top. Don’t have a temper tantrum. Don’t erupt with destructive force like Mount Vesuvius. Why this caution from James? Because the kind of anger that erupts like a volcano is usually the wrong kind of anger. It is the kind of situation in which, in the heat of the moment, we say or do something we will later regret. And, more often than not, our anger does not contribute to the development of a Christ-like character that pleases God.

Remember what it says in the verses we looked at last Sunday in Ephesians 4. Paul says: “In your anger do not sin.” It’s okay to get angry about certain things. It’s okay to *be* angry, as long as you’re angry for the right reason. It’s okay to be angry, Paul says, but when you’re angry, do not sin. Don’t hold onto your anger. Don’t allow it to fester. Don’t allow it to “morph” into resentment, bitterness, or even hate. Don’t allow the devil to use your anger for his purposes. If you let him, he will. He will use your anger to cause heap big trouble in your life, in your relationships, and in the church.

DANGER: ANGER AHEAD

Let me give you an example of how dangerous anger can be. You have probably heard of Ben Carson. *Dr. Ben Carson*. He is a world-renowned neurosurgeon. Since 1984, he has been the head of Pediatric Neurosurgery at Johns Hopkins University Hospital in Baltimore. In 1987, he became the first surgeon to successfully separate conjoined twins who were connected at their heads. His autobiography is entitled *Gifted Hands*, which was made into a movie starring Cuba Gooding, Jr. not too long ago.

As a boy, growing up in a poor neighborhood in Detroit, being raised by a single mother after his parents divorced, Ben Carson had a violent, uncontrollable temper. He would lash out at others at the slightest provocation. One time he tried to hit his mother with a hammer because

she didn't approve of his choice of clothes. On another occasion he inflicted a major head injury on a classmate in a dispute over a locker at school. Then there was the time he almost stabbed a friend to death in an argument over what radio station to listen to. Angered when his friend turned the dial to another radio station from the one he (Ben) preferred, Ben impulsively pulled out his pocket knife, flicked open the blade, and lunged viciously at his friend's stomach. In the providence of God, the blade of the knife struck the metal buckle of the friend's belt and snapped off.

Terrified by the realization of what he had just done, Ben ran home as fast as he could, locked himself in the bathroom, and cried out to God for help. He admitted to God – and to himself – that he had a severe anger problem. He could deny it no longer. And he asked God to take his temper away. He slipped out of the bathroom and got a Bible. (Smart young man.) Back on the bathroom floor, he turned to the Book of Proverbs, where God spoke to him through these words in Proverbs 16:32:

Better a patient man than a warrior,
a man who controls his temper than one who takes a city.

Ben began to realize that much of his anger stemmed from putting himself in the center of everything. A lot of people do that. A lot of people go through life thinking, *"It's all about me."* That is what Ben had done. When something happened that he didn't like, he internalized it and made it about himself. When he learned to take himself out of the equation, he began to see that not everything was directed at him, and that he wasn't the only person with troubles or problems. With God's help, he discovered that he could control his anger instead of being controlled by it.

Ben Carson is one of the most gifted surgeons in the whole world and a man with a strong and sincere faith in Jesus Christ. But do you see how easily his anger in his youth could have derailed his life and destroyed his dream of becoming a doctor?

IED: INTERMITTENT EXPLOSIVE DISORDER

You may not be aware of it, but there is actually a recognized emotional disorder known by the letters IED. I know, you thought IED stood for Improvised Explosive Devices, those makeshift explosives that have caused so many deaths, and so much loss of limbs, in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. You're right. It does stand for that. It turns out, though, that IED also stands for Intermittent Explosive Disorder, which, according to the Mayo Clinic, is marked by repeated eruptions of impulsive, aggressive, violent behavior, or angry outbursts in which a person reacts grossly out of proportion to the situation. Road rage, sports rage, domestic abuse, throwing or breaking objects, and other temper tantrums may be signs of Intermittent Explosive Disorder. Following an outburst, individuals with IED may feel remorse, regret, or embarrassment over what they have done. According to the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), this anger disorder may affect as many as 16 million Americans in their lifetimes. This is not a good thing.

THE DIALECT OF ANGER

I hope you took time to read the article I wrote for this month's *Faith in Focus*, our monthly church newsletter. *I'm going to be really angry with you if you didn't read it! (No, I'm not. Just kidding.)* This being the season of Thanksgiving, I wrote about thankfulness. At one point I quoted Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of Ephesians 5:4 in *The Message*, which says: "Thanksgiving is our dialect." As undeserving sinners saved by the grace of God, as beloved children of our Heavenly Father, as followers of the Lord Jesus Christ and heirs of eternal life, as recipients of grace upon grace, it only makes sense that we make thanksgiving the dialect or language we speak. And not just in the month of November, but all year long.

I have noticed, though, and I'm sure you have, too, that many, many people – including many professing Christians – seem to have adopted the dialect of anger as their dominant language. Not thanksgiving. Not praise. Not affirmation or appreciation. Not grace or gratitude. But anger and bitterness. If you know someone of whom this is true, someone who often if not always seems to be angry about one thing or another, you're likely to think of him/her as an "angry person," and you feel like you have to walk on proverbial egg shells so you don't unintentionally say or do something to see him/her off. It is not easy to be in a relationship with an angry person.

To get really personal, what dialect do you speak? What dialect would your wife or husband, your kids or parents, your friends or colleagues at work, say you speak? The dialect of grumbling or complaining? The dialect of criticizing and finding fault? The dialect of discontent or envy? The dialect of anger and bitterness? If the dialect of anger is the language you routinely speak, don't try to excuse it or rationalize it by saying it is just the way you are. You may be more predisposed to anger or to intermittent explosive outbursts than someone else, but that doesn't make it okay. And it is not okay to say it is someone else's fault.

QUICK/SLOW/SLOW

The "quick/slow/slow" rule in James 1:19 may seem elementary, but for anyone who struggles with anger, for anyone with a volatile temper, it can be a practical and effective way of blocking the instinct to get angry first and think later. The rule of action James espouses really is simple: "Be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to get angry." As is so often the case, Peterson expresses it colorfully in *The Message*: "Post this at all the intersections, dear friends: Lead with your ears, follow up with your tongue, and let anger straggle along in the rear."

Did you get that? *Lead* with your *ears*, *follow up* with your *tongue*, and let *anger* straggle along *in the rear*. Most of us, I'm afraid, have a hard time with this, because the person we are most interested in listening to is ourselves. Even when we give the appearance of listening to someone, we may not really be listening as much as thinking about what we want to say next. As a result, what we think of as conversations may actually be a series of monologues by two or more people taking turns talking about themselves or their experiences. Dietrich Bonhoeffer made this observation in his book *Life Together*: "Christians," he said,

“especially ministers, so often think they must always contribute something when they are in the company of others, that this is the one service they have to render. They forget that listening can be a greater service than speaking.

“Many people are looking for an ear that will listen. They do not find it among Christians, because these Christians are talking where they should be listening. But he who can no longer listen to his brother will soon be no longer listening to God either; he will be doing nothing but prattle in the presence of God, too. This is the beginning of the death of the spiritual life, and in the end there is nothing left but spiritual chatter.”

I don't ever want that to happen to me. And I don't want it to happen to you. Is it possible to overstate the importance of listening to God and His still, small voice? I don't think so. In the words of Solomon,

Guard your steps when you go to the house of God.
Go near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools....
Do not be quick with your mouth,
do not be hasty in your heart
to utter anything before God.
God is in heaven and you are on earth,
so let your words be few.
(Ecclesiastes 5:1-2)

There is a time to be silent and, yes, a time to speak (Eccles. 3:7b). But if we neglect the time to be quiet, if we fail to appreciate the value of listening, and instead fill our days with chatter, spiritual or otherwise, neither our relationship with God nor our relationships with others will develop the deep, healthy roots they need to flourish.

So, you see, giving priority to listening is not only an effective strategy against anger, it is essential for healthy relationships with God and one another.

SEEK FIRST TO UNDERSTAND

Some of you have probably read Stephen Covey's book, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. One of the seven habits Covey advocated in the book was this: *Seek first to understand, then to be understood*. Listen to it again: *Seek first to understand, then to be understood*. As with listening and talking in general, this is not the way most of us operate. We want to be understood. We want others to understand us. We want people to empathize with us. We want people to understand our experience, our pain, our disappointments. We want them to understand our point of view. It is not true of everyone, of course, but for many people, I'm afraid, being understood is more important than making the effort to understand others.

But the principle of seeking first to understand is really another way of saying what James says about leading with your ears, or being quick to listen and slow to speak. When you make

the effort to listen and understand, rather than rushing to judgment, you defuse the anger that otherwise might be ready to explode. Does this make sense?

Quick to listen. Slow to speak. And slow to get angry. Don't give in to the urge to speak first and think later. That usually leads to regret or embarrassment or both. Listen first. And think before you speak. Understand that listening itself can be an act of love. And love, as Paul says in his magnum opus on love in 1 Corinthians 13, is "not easily angered" (13:5).

For healthy, God-honoring relationships in the body of Christ, in your family, at work, at school, and everywhere, put this rule to work in your life: Be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to get angry. Lead with your ears, not your mouth, and let anger straggle behind in the rear. Quick. Slow. Slow. It could make a revolutionary difference in your life. Really.

DO'S AND DON'TS OF A GRACE-FILLED LIFE

Now, very briefly, I want to call your attention to this passage in Romans 12 where, by means of a series of do's and don'ts, Paul tells us how to live a grace-filled life. Starting in verse 16, he says: "*Do* live in harmony with one another," Literally, in the Greek, it says: "Think the same thing toward one another." Paul then spells out what he means by that, as he goes on to say: "*Don't* be proud. *Don't* be a snob. *Don't* look down on others. *Do* open your heart and make friends with the poor. *Don't* be conceited. *Don't* think of yourself more highly than you ought to think (12:3). *Don't* be wise in your own eyes and think you know better than everybody else." In other words, humility and harmony will go a long way toward rooting out anger in your life and relationships.

Then in verses 17 and 18: "*Don't* repay anyone evil for evil. *Don't* give in to the urge to retaliate when someone says or does something that hurts or angers you. *Do* be careful to do what everyone knows is right. *Do* your best, as far as it depends on you, to live at peace with everyone." The Bible is an utterly realistic book. It acknowledges the reality in this world that it is not always possible to live at peace with others. It is not always possible to live at peace with someone who is at war with you. There may be someone in your life who seems to think his/her purpose in life is to make your life difficult. It is not easy to live at peace with someone like that. That is why Paul says: "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you...."

Moving on to verses 19 and 20: "*Don't* take revenge. *Don't* insist on getting even. *Don't* take matters into your own hands. *Do* leave room for God's wrath. *Do* remember that avenging evil is God's prerogative, not yours personally. Instead of seeking revenge, *do* treat your enemy with kindness and grace. You never know, your kindness may actually be the thing that brings your enemy to repentance. And your enemy will no longer be your enemy."

Finally, in verse 21: "*Don't* be overcome by evil, but *do* overcome evil with good. *Don't* let evil get the best of you. *Do* get the best of evil by doing good. *Don't* give in to evil" – or anger or bitterness or rage or slander or deceit or malice or lust or greed or envy or any other temptation to take the low road. "*Do* overcome evil" in all these forms – in *every* form – by doing what is good and right and honorable and pleasing to God.

You and I can't do these things on our own. We can't do it in our own strength. But God promises to give us the strength and grace we need through the power of the Holy Spirit who is with us and at work in us. *Don't* try to overcome anger on your own. *Do* surrender your anger – or any attitude or habit of your heart that is not pleasing to God – and let God work in you to produce the kind of holy, grace-filled life He desires.

Lord, let it be so in us. Let it be so in me. Amen.