

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,  
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, November 11, 2012**

**LIFE IN THE BODY:  
WHAT TO DO WHEN YOU'RE ANGRY**

**Ephesians 4:26-27, 31-32  
James 1:19-21**

I want to talk with you about anger this morning. There's a lot of anger in the world today, don't you think? That's intuitively obvious, I suppose, to the most casual observer. And there are a lot of angry people in the world. You may be among them. You may be angry about something or angry with someone this morning. Some of you may be angry with some of your fellow Americans if you didn't like the results of the elections this past week. You may be angry pretty much with the whole world because it's just so messed up. You may even be angry with God for one reason or another.

Fact is: anger happens. And it's not always a bad thing. It's not always a good thing, but it's not always a bad thing. If you never get angry about anything, there's something wrong with you. The evils that human beings perpetrate against one another *ought* to make you angry. Sexual abuse, sex trafficking, religious oppression and persecution, racial prejudice, acts of terrorism – all of these ought to cause anger to well up inside of us. But not anger alone. Along with anger, tears of compassion, and prayers to God for men and women, boys and girls, young and old, who suffer in ways most of us can't even begin to imagine. Injustice anywhere ought to make us angry. The mistreatment of our fellow human beings ought to make us angry. If our leaders deliberately set out to deceive us, whether they succeed or not, it ought to make us angry. When what is evil is not recognized as being evil but is celebrated as good and is heralded as a sacred right, that ought to make us angry. And to cry out to God for mercy.

Anger is not inherently bad. The Bible makes it clear that there really are two different kinds of anger. There is good anger and there is bad anger. Righteous anger and unrighteous anger. Godly anger and ungodly anger. The problem with anger – at least, it seems to me, the most obvious problem – is that too often the anger we feel and express or experience or observe in others is the wrong kind. And it produces acts of aggression. It leads too often to violence and vengeance. This is true, you know, on national and international levels and it's just as true among individuals, among people like us on a level of personal relationships.

We know that anger is not always bad because the Bible speaks many times of God's anger. Even His fierce anger. For example, after rescuing the people of Israel from their bondage in Egypt and guiding them towards the land He had promised to give them, we read in Numbers 11 that the LORD's anger was aroused by the grumbling and complaining about the hardships the people had to endure on their way. Soon, in addition to this cry of grumbling and complaining, they began to crave other food. They grumbled about the manna that God was providing for them day after day after day. They said: "If only we had meat to eat" like we ate in Egypt (11:4). At this "the LORD became exceedingly angry" (11:10) and He said to them (this is a paraphrase): "If it's meat you want, it's meat you'll get. I will give you so

much meat that it's going to be coming out of your nostrils." Do you remember what happened? The quail came, so many that they were piled up about three feet high off the ground in every direction as far as you could walk in a day from Israel's camp (11:31-32). The Lord gave them what they clamored for, but His anger burned against them and He struck them with a severe plague (11:33), for their hearts were not fully His and, like so many people today, what they really cared most about was themselves and what they wanted.

What I've just described, sadly, is not an isolated instance. Because of the fickleness of their faith, because of this persistent grumbling, because of their chronic disobedience, their stubborn unwillingness to trust God, "the Lord's anger burned against Israel," Moses said, "and He made them wander in the desert for forty years" (Numbers 32:13). Recalling that time, that period of wilderness wandering for forty years, the LORD Himself said this in Psalm 95:

For forty years I was angry with that generation.  
I said, "They are a people whose hearts go astray,  
and they have not known my ways."  
So I declared on oath in my anger:  
"They shall never enter my rest."  
(Psalm 95:10-11; Hebrews 3:10-11)

We know, too, that Jesus became angry on certain occasions. One Sabbath, for example, while Jesus was in the synagogue, there was a man there with a hand that was all shriveled up. Now the Pharisees were there, too, and they felt threatened by Jesus from the very beginning, and so they were looking for something – anything – they could use against Jesus in their campaign to discredit Him. They were watching to see if Jesus would be so audacious, so brazen in His disrespect for the Law, as to heal this man on the Sabbath day. Jesus knew what they were up to. So He had the man with the shriveled hand stand up in front of everyone and Jesus asked the whole crowd there in the synagogue: "Which is lawful on the Sabbath? To do good or to do evil? To save life or kill?" Nobody said a word. No one said a single word. The Pharisees all remained silent. The Bible says that Jesus looked around at them in anger. He was angry. Not only was He angry, He was also deeply distressed at their lack of compassion and the stubborn hardness of their hearts. And you know what Jesus did, don't you? He told the man to stretch out his hand and when he did the man's hand was completely restored. Jesus healed him right there on the spot.

Jonathan Edwards, the 18th-century pastor and preacher in colonial New England, famously preached a sermon entitled "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." But Edwards also believed and preached that we are sinners in the hands of a loving and gracious God. The righteous anger of God is not something we can simply dismiss, but His anger is not God's only attribute, nor is it His dominant attribute in His relationship with all of us who are a part of His redeemed people. The Bible reminds us repeatedly that the LORD is *slow to anger* and abounding in love. The LORD Himself says this to Moses in Exodus 34, verse 6, and Moses repeats it in Numbers 14:18. Nehemiah (9:17), Joel (2:13), and David (Psalm 86:15; 103:8; 145:8), all declare it. Even Jonah knew it. And the really strange thing is that Jonah was angry because of it. Jonah didn't want God to be gracious or compassionate to the people of

Nineveh. He didn't want God to be slow to anger or abounding in love towards this pagan nation that he (Jonah) viewed as the enemy. Jonah didn't want God to be merciful to them. He didn't want God to relent from sending the calamity about which He warned on Nineveh. Jonah was eagerly awaiting the day of judgment when Nineveh would finally get what it had coming to it. That day couldn't come soon enough for Jonah. And when the people of Nineveh heard Jonah's call to repentance and they repented of their evil ways and they turned to the Lord in humility, when God showed compassion to that city and all its people, "Jonah was greatly displeased and became angry" (Jonah 4:1). He was angry with God for being gracious and compassionate. He was angry with God for being slow to anger and abounding in love. He was angry with God for relenting from sending the calamity and catastrophe upon this people who, in Jonah's estimation, deserved nothing but calamity and catastrophe.

But that's the way it is with God. If He is angry with us, or with anyone, you can be sure it's because we deserve it. But in His mercy, as David declares in Psalm 103, the LORD "does not treat us as our sins deserve, or repay us according to our iniquities" (103:10). If God is angry with you or me, if God is angry with this nation or any nation, it's deserved. You can be sure that God's anger is justified and just. And yet, as Jeremiah reminds us in the midst of his lamentations over the fall of Judah and Jerusalem and the exile to Babylon of many of his fellow Jews, "Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, for His compassions never fail. They are new every morning. Great is (His) faithfulness" (Lamentations 3:22-23).

If the Bible shows us the righteous anger of God – and I hope you've gotten a clear picture of that this morning – it also introduces us to a lot of angry people. I've already mentioned Jonah, who was angry with God for His mercy to the Ninevites, and also angry about the withering of a vine that had provided him with shade from the blazing hot sun (Jonah 4:5-9), showing himself to be more concerned with a vine than he was with the spiritual well-being of an entire city.

But Jonah is not alone. You don't have to look hard to find people in the Bible who were angry, sometimes with good reason, sometimes not.

- There's Cain, the son of Adam and Eve, who was so angry with his brother Abel that he murdered him (Genesis 4), which is, of course, a warning to us of where anger can lead if it's not controlled and overcome.
- There's Potiphar, an Egyptian official, who "burned with anger toward Joseph", the Bible says (Genesis 39:10), when his wife falsely accused Joseph of making sexual advances toward her. Potiphar didn't know that the accusations were false, so he had Joseph thrown into prison.
- When Moses came down from the mountain after receiving from God the stone tablets engraved with the Ten Commandments, "his anger burned" when he saw the people of Israel worshipping a golden calf they had made (Exodus 32). In his anger, Moses threw down the stone tablets, breaking them to pieces, symbolizing the breaking of the covenant by the people of Israel. Then Moses took the golden calf and threw it into the fire and burned it, after which he ground it into a powder and mixed it with water and made all the people drink it. Oh, yes, he was angry.

- Ahab, one of the worst in a long line of bad kings in Israel, coveted a vineyard that belonged to a man named Naboth (I Kings 21). When Naboth refused to sell it to him, Ahab became “sullen and angry.” He went back to the palace, “lay on his bed sulking and refused to eat.” Just the way you’d expect your king to act, right? Ahab’s wife Jezebel, a woman with absolutely no scruples, then took matters into her own hands and arranged for Naboth to be killed, so her husband could have the vineyard he desired.
- Then there is King Xerxes, in the Book of Esther, who “became furious and burned with anger” toward his wife when Queen Vashti refused his order to parade her beauty before the king and all his drunken guests (1;12). As punishment, Vashti was banished permanently from the king’s presence and dethroned as queen. But when we read on in Esther, we find that “later when the anger of King Xerxes had subsided, he remembered Vashti” (2:1) and he missed her. Sometimes, we come to regret things we have said or done in anger, don’t we? Xerxes did. But God used these circumstances to bring a young Jewish woman named Esther to a royal position as queen in order to rescue the Jewish people from a conspiracy to wipe them out.
- Jesus, you may recall, told a story about a man who was way over his head in debt with no way to ever repay his creditor, who happened to be the king (Matthew 18:23-35). The debtor pled for mercy and the king “took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go” (18:27). But what did this forgiven debtor do? He turned right around and demanded that a man who owed \$100 pay it back immediately or be thrown into prison. The man who owed \$100 begged for mercy, but the one who had just received mercy showed him no mercy, but had him put in jail. When the king, who had been generous with his mercy toward the man who owed him a gazillion dollars, was told about this, do you know what he did? “In anger (he) turned (the man) over to the jailers to be tortured” until he had paid back everything he owed, right down to the last penny (128:34). The point Jesus was making is about forgiveness: “This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you,” He said, “unless you forgive your brother (or sister) from your heart” (18:35).
- You may also recall Jesus’ story of the prodigal son – or is it the prodigal father? – in Luke 15. After the son has gone off and wasted his inheritance in wild and self-indulgent partying, he finds himself in a pig pen with nothing to eat. Finally coming to his senses, he decides to go back home in the hope of being taken on as one of his father’s hired men. But his father, filled with compassion, sees him coming when he is still a long way off, and the father runs out to meet him and welcome him home. His homecoming prompts a great celebration, because, as the father says: “This son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.” But, as you know if you know the story, not everyone is happy. Not everyone is in a celebrating mood. When the older son, the older brother of the one who has just returned home, hears about what is going on, he becomes angry and refuses to go in (15:28). He is angry with his brother for being so self-indulgent and irresponsible. And he is angry with his father for welcoming his brother. He is angry, too, because he thinks if anyone deserves a party, it is he, because he has always been careful to be a dutiful, obedient son.

This is just a sampling. There are many other examples you could cite. Sometimes anger is justified, appropriate, righteous. Sometimes it is not. Whether justified or not, we know that anger is not uncommon. Which is why both David in Psalm 4:4 and Paul in Ephesians 4:26

found it necessary to say, “In your anger do not sin.” They do not say: *‘If you ever just happen to find yourself angry about something...’* Instead, they say: *“When you are angry, make sure you do not sin.”* They understood that anger is a fact of life, and it is okay to be angry, depending on the reason you are angry and what you do with your anger. It is okay to be angry, depending on the circumstances. Just make sure your anger doesn’t lead you into sin.

I need to make a confession to you. I need to tell you about something that made me angry this morning as I was hurriedly trying to finish up my sermon to preach to you on anger. I got to church early this morning and I was just trying to wrap things up and I hit something on the keyboard of my laptop. I’m not sure what it was, but I hit something and suddenly the whole text of my manuscript disappeared. Gone! And I didn’t know how to retrieve it. Fortunately, I cried out to Alex Osborne for help and he was able to find all of my printed text that I had actually saved, but the last hour, hour and fifteen minutes of work was gone. It’s pretty much here in my notes, but it was gone from the printed page.

When you are angry (he says, preaching to himself ) do not sin. Do not sin. Don’t let your anger become an occasion for sin. Don’t let your anger – however noble and righteous it is – deteriorate or degenerate into bitterness. Don’t let any roots of bitterness grow up in you. And don’t hold on to your anger. Get over it. There may be something you need to do to get over it, but get over it. Paul puts it this way, “Don’t let the sun go down while you are still angry.” Don’t let your head hit the pillow while you still have feelings of bitterness towards someone or about something. Don’t wait to work it out. And be careful when you’re angry that you don’t allow the devil to have any room in your life, any foothold. You see, if you give the devil a foothold, he’s going to try to take over the whole house of your life. And the devil can really mess with us when we’re angry.

So it’s okay to be angry, but make sure you don’t sin. Don’t let anger or bitterness fester within you. That’s what Paul is saying. And don’t allow Satan to use it as a wedge in your relationship with God or in your relationship with anyone else. It’s okay to be angry, unless it’s the wrong kind of anger. Paul has just talked about not sinning when you’re angry, which means that it’s possible to be angry without sinning. But then he says in verse 31, you have to get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. He’s just said it’s okay to be angry, and now he says we have to get rid of it completely? Well, he’s talking about two different kinds of anger. The anger that is self-serving, the anger that is not rooted in God’s righteousness, that’s the anger we have to get rid of. Completely. And replace it with what Paul says in verse 32, “Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.”

How do you get rid of anger? By forgiving. And by remembering how God has treated you, how God treats all of us with mercy and grace and love. Mark Twain said that anger is an acid that can do more harm to the vessel in which it is stored than on anything on which it is poured. If the acid of anger is stored in you or in me, you know what? We’re in trouble. And that anger will do more harm to us than to the one or ones at whom we’re angry.

I've got a lot more I want to say about this, about anger and about how we deal with it in our lives and relationships and its proper place among us in the body of Christ. And I'll do that next week, the Lord willing. But I commend the words of Paul and of James to you and encourage you to make the rule of James a part of your life. The rule is simply, "Quick, slow, slow." Quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry. Because when we rush into anger, the kind of anger we exhibit will never, or most likely not, produce the fruit of righteousness that God desires.

Lord, have your way in us and let it be so to the glory of your name. Amen.