

Lesson 8

Be Angry & Sin Not

Be angry and do not sin. Don't let the sun go down on your anger, and don't give the devil an opportunity, Ephesians 4.26-27.

Introduction

Can you imagine what would happen if everyone learned how to put away sinful anger? Child abuse and divorce would go away. Murder, terrorism, and war would halt. And, amazingly, many health problems would clear up. It is believed that anger can harm a person's heart just as much as smoking and high blood pressure. Some have even gone as far to say that it is a leading indicator in a person acquiring heart disease.

It is not by accident that Paul addresses the imperative of casting off the old man and putting on the new just before he teaches on the problem of anger.

to take off your former way of life, the old self that is corrupted by deceitful desires, to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, the one created according to God's likeness in righteousness and purity of the truth, Ephesians 4.22-24.

Contrasts of Ephesians 4.22-24

See the contrasts. There is an *old self* and a *new self*. One is to be *taken off*; the other is to be *put on*. One is *corrupted*; the other is *created*. The old self is connected to *deceitful desires*; the new self is connected to *righteousness and purity of the truth*.

Old Self	New Self
Taken Off	Put On
Corrupted	Created
by Deceitful Desires	in Righteousness / Purity

God has recreated you, being made alive by the Spirit as an act of grace, Ephesians 2.5.

You have been created as God's masterpiece, created for the purpose of good works, Ephesians 2.10.

Paul goes on to say in that verse that we are expected to walk in those good works. Fundamental to this "walking" is the putting on of the new self. We must *act it out* by making it visible in our attitudes and behavior.³⁷

The emphasis in Ephesians 4.23-24 is that God has created in you a new heart, one that is like his in *righteousness and purity*. If your heart has been purified, it will surely reflect itself in your actions. *A good tree produces good fruit*, Matthew 7.17. All our external actions reflect the change that has taken place on the inside. Understanding what Paul communicates in these verses is key to finding success in the fight

³⁷ Piper, John. *Sermons from John Piper (1980-1989)*. Minneapolis, MN: Desiring God, 2007.

against uncontrolled anger. Verses 26-27 are a specific application of one of the ways we are to put on the new man. Here we find two points regarding anger:

There is a Right Time to be Angry

Be angry and not sin. This is taken from Psalm 4.4. Of the four problems listed in 4.25-29 (lying, anger, stealing, and foul language), only anger is mentioned as having a time that is appropriate. It is a God given emotion that can be proper and even essential. Having and expressing emotion and feelings is not a matter of sin. However, we must guard what we do with those feelings, how we express them, and how they impact others. Some expressions of anger are clearly wrong:

Let all bitterness, anger and wrath, shouting and slander be removed from you, along with all malice, Ephesians 4.31.

Acceptable Anger

This is the type of anger that arises out of deep settled convictions regarding the honor of God. We should be angry at injustice, immorality, and ungodliness. This is the type of anger David spoke of in Psalm 69.9: *zeal for your house has consumed me, and the insults of those who insult you have fallen on me.* This kind of love is unselfish. It is based on love for God and concern for others.

It is something that should rise slowly from within. James 1.19-20 teaches us to be *slow to anger*. We are to be slow to anger so that we will be able to rule our spirit and consider the situation with care. Unrestrained anger that is allowed to rise quickly will never bring glory to God and magnify the righteous character we are to possess. Unacceptable, sinful anger is that which is a boiling-over rage or inward seething resentment. It is buried in self-defense and is often self-serving. It is undisciplined and vindictive. Injured pride, envy, and spite fuel sinful anger.

Connected with Grief

Acceptable anger is also connected closely to grief. That is, we direct our emotions against the *sin*, but also connect it with grief for the *sinner*. We must never forget there is a person behind the situation ... a person who has been created in the image of God. In many situations, it is a brother or sister in Christ. When we get in these situations, we need to move with a hope for reconciliation and not just write the person off.

If possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone, Romans 12.18.

Deal with Your Anger Quickly

Don't let the sun go down on your anger..., 4.26b. If you hang on to anger, it can easily turn into bitterness and manifest itself in wrath. It has been said that righteous anger very easily becomes perverted and soured and is turned against those we love. Passionate feelings against others and their actions are not to be harbored for very long. In the Torah, sunset was the time limit for paying a worker his wages, Deuteronomy 24.15. Some feel Paul has picked up on this principle and applied it here ... saying there is danger in holding on to anger too long.

This is what Paul means in 4.27: *don't give the devil an opportunity*. What can start out as righteous, healthy anger can be held on to or even nursed. Then it becomes personal and a matter of personal pride. This is the type of anger that has been described as “evil in itself, and dishonorable to God; being the vomit of a proud heart and unmeekened spirit.”³⁸

It is this type of anger that makes us worse than the one who offended us, and turns them into the victim!

This quote by Frederick Buechner is found in Kent Hughes'³⁹ work:

Of the seven deadly sins, anger is possibly the most fun. To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll over your tongue the prospect of bitter confrontation still to come, to savor to the last toothsome morsel both the pain you are given and the pain you are giving 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.

You Can Control Your Anger

We are expected to overcome our sins. The power to do so is given to us by the Spirit. There are no exceptions made for those who are born with a short fuse or have fallen prey as a victim. He simply says:

Let all bitterness, anger and wrath, shouting and slander be removed from you, along with all malice, Ephesians 4.31.

This is not the only passage in the New or Old Testament that teaches us to learn to control our anger:

- Proverbs 12:18: *There is one who speaks rashly, like a piercing sword; but the tongue of the wise brings healing.*
- Proverbs 14:16–17: *A wise person is cautious and turns from evil, but a fool is easily angered and is careless. A quick-tempered person acts foolishly, and one who schemes is hated.*
- Proverbs 15:1: *A gentle answer turns away anger, but a harsh word stirs up wrath.*
- Proverbs 15:18: *A hot-tempered person stirs up conflict, but one slow to anger calms strife.*
- Proverbs 17:14: *To start a conflict is to release a flood; stop the dispute before it breaks out.*
- Proverbs 19:11: *A person's insight gives him patience, and his virtue is to overlook an offense.*
- Genesis 4.7: *Cain was told he must master his sin. If you do what is right, won't you be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is for you, but you must rule over it.”*

Scripture tells us that we are never expected to do what we cannot possibly do, 1 Corinthians 10.13. You can do this. You must learn to replace the works of the flesh with the fruit of the Spirit. This is accomplished by walking by the Spirit. When we do so, we will not carry out the desires of the flesh, Galatians 5.16.

³⁸ Boston, Thomas. *The Complete Works of the Late Rev. Thomas Boston*, Volume 4, ed. Samuel McMillan (Wheaton, IL: Richard Owen Roberts, 1980), p. 357.

³⁹ Hughes, R. Kent. *Ephesians: The Mystery of the Body of Christ*. Preaching the Word. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1990, p. 151.

This is a process that is learned over time. It requires constant attention. When we feel sinful anger arising, we must learn to yield to the Spirit and rely on his strength.

Will We Submit to the Spirit's Direction?

Our own experience typically proves that we can control our anger if we want to do so. Every one of us has controlled our anger – instantly turned it off – *when we wanted to*. Maybe, you have been in a heated argument with someone ... then the phone rings. You answer and says, “Hey there, it’s so good to hear from you! How are you doing?” In that instant, you are controlling your anger. The same is true on the job when your employer says something that upsets you greatly, but you keep your composure because you value your job. You can do this. You simply need to choose to do it consistently.

For Thought and Reflection

1. What has been the most difficult part for you in controlling your anger? How can you deal with it?
2. Why is it important to understand Paul does not say all anger is sin? At what point do our angry feelings become sin?
3. Why is it important to handle our anger in a timely manner?
4. Can we control our feelings? Do you think Paul’s command to put it away is simplistic? Why/Why not?
5. Why should our righteous anger be connected to grief?
6. Who is righteous anger always focused upon? What typically happens if it is focused on us?