

Communication Matters
The Power of Anger
March 29, 2015

PRELUDE – Made New
Feature – “Don’t Think I Don’t Think about It”

Announcements – Video

Worship – Made New / Beautiful Things

Drama – Meet the McWraths
Feature – “Angry All the Time”

“Angry all the time” ... I’m curious, do you know anyone who could be described in that way? Could you perhaps be described in that way?

One of the greatest things that ever happened in my life was the opportunity in June of 2010 to attend a four-day retreat especially designed for pastors and their spouses. At the time, I didn’t really want to go. In fact, I didn’t even sign up for it – some friends here at North Heartland arranged for us to go as a gift, so we kind of “had to.” But, as I said, it turned out to be one of the greatest things that ever happened to me because of something I learned about myself.

In preparation for the retreat they gave us a bunch of tests to take; tests that gauged things like personality type and emotional well-being. Then, at the retreat, the leader met with us to go over our results. But before we started, he said, “So, how are you doing?”

I said, “Oh, I’m doing fine. You know, I have my ups and downs like everybody else but in comparison to a lot of people, my life is easy. I have nothing to complain about.”

Then he pulled out one of the tests I had taken, the TJTA which analyzes how you’re *really* doing in spite of what you say. And he said, “Rick, this test makes it look like you’re an angry person. Is that true?”

And, I looked at Jetta and I said, “What do you think, honey? Am I an angry person?”

She said, “Yes, you are.”

... which wasn’t too much of a surprise because we’d had a similar conversation about a month earlier in which she had pointed out that I seemed to be frustrated and irritated about pretty much everything, especially things related to my job as the pastor of this church.

At the time, I protested her assessment. Truthfully, I became defensive and self-justifying. “Well, my job has been really hard lately. We have had to downsize our staff. We’ve got so many financial challenges. Things are way more complex than ever before. People are mad and leaving the church ... blah, blah, blah, blah, blah.”

But sitting there in that retreat looking at a counselor who was simply presenting me with the results of a test I had taken, I had to admit the truth. Beneath the surface, I was angry ... and pretty much all the time.

And I want to talk to you this morning about what I learned – and have continued to learn about this issue since then – but, first, let me put this message into context for those of you who may be here for the first time.

As Shannon said, today we are concluding our series “Communication Matters.” And this series is based on a very brief statement that the Apostle James makes in the first few lines of his letter written to first-century Jewish Christians who had been dispersed all over the Roman world and who were under persecution for their faith. Things were not going well for them. They were stressed out. They were disappointed that God wasn’t coming through for them.

And after explaining to them how God was still at work in the middle of their chaos, James gave them a very specific instruction concerning how they should communicate with one another (and even with God).

This is what he wrote – and I’m going to ask you to read this out loud with me as we have done each week.

Here we go ...

Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry. James 1:19 (NIV)

Which is exactly the opposite, remember, of the way humans naturally act. Most of us are quick to become angry, quick to speak (or act out in some way including passive-aggressive behavior if that’s more our style) ... we’re quick to become angry, quick to speak and *then*, after we’ve expressed our anger, we might listen in an effort to understand what actually happened. Or we might not. It depends.

But James says, no, don’t do it that way. Be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry. And then he adds a very important rationale for his instruction.

Do it this way, he says, “with anger *at the end of the chain* – *after* you have listened, *after* you have given careful thought to the best way to express yourself (and that’s what we talked about in the past two weeks – messages are online if you weren’t here) ...

“Put anger at the end of the chain,” James says ...

*... because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires.
James 1:20 (NIV)*

Now, the word translated as “righteousness” here doesn’t refer the righteous standing that God freely gives us when we put our faith in Jesus of Nazareth and what He did on the cross and in His resurrection. James isn’t talking about salvation.

Instead, he’s talking about the kind of day-to-day life that God desires for his people. Actually, in this context, the meaning of the word is closer to “justice.” *Human anger doesn’t bring about the justice that God desires in everyday life.*

What I’m Not Talking About

And that's a very important idea that we'll come back to in just a bit ... but first let me tell you what I am not going to talk about in this message.

First of all, I'm not going to talk about *the power of anger* (which is the title of this message and, frankly, a bad call on my part) because I think that's already been made clear in the first two messages and also in the song with which we began this service.

Don't think I don't think about it
Don't think I don't have regrets
Don't think I don't wonder 'bout
Could've been should've been all worked out
I know what I felt and I know what I said
But don't think I don't think about it.ⁱ

Great song ... and yet another good reason to be here on time. ☺

The point is that anger can be very destructive. It can lead to a life of regret; a life of second guessing actions that were taken and decisions that were made out of anger. And I think we all get that so I'm not going to talk about it.

The second thing I'm not going to talk about ... well, you have to understand a little bit of Greek first. The Greeks had two main words to describe anger. And both of them are found in our New Testament and simply translated as "anger."

Thumos (thu-moss) is the word they used to describe the kind of occasional anger which rises and passes rapidly.

It's actually a word used to describe the flame which comes from dried straw. You know how that works: you light the straw, it blazes up quickly, flames out quickly and then it vanishes. *Thumos* anger works like that. If you've ever hit your finger with a hammer, you've experienced *thumos*.

In addition, if you've ever been angered when a person's honor is violated, or your family and property are threatened, you've experienced *thumos*. *Thumos* is what drives a person to stand up for himself, for his country, and for his loved ones. It can be a powerful force for good.ⁱⁱ

By the way, this is also the trap of *thumos*. Because it usually feels so right, it's easy to keep lighting it up and letting it burn to the point of destruction. The brief flare up of *thumos* can turn into a raging forest fire or worse ... which is why ...

The Bible tells us very clearly that this kind of anger needs to be controlled.

*A fool gives full vent to his anger, but a wise man keeps himself under control.
Proverbs 29:11 (NIV)*

Thumos is the kind of anger for which most anger management techniques are designed.

However, in this message today, I'm not going to talk about *thumos* anger ... which means ... that I'm also not going to

talk about *anger management*.

And not because it isn't a worthwhile subject. It's actually a great subject and there are lots of techniques you could put into play that would be of great help to you if you have a problem with *thumos*. But you can read about those things on the internet or get a self-help book at Borders, so you really don't need me to give you a laundry list.

Having said that, however, I do think I should probably shoot down two prevailing myths associated with *thumos*.

Here's the first one: "It's not my fault that I'm angry; my anger is caused by external events and other people."

Several years ago, the police chief of Bellevue, Washington, reported that a motorist had become so angry when his vehicle got stuck in six inches of snow that he pulled a tire iron out of the trunk and smashed all the windows of his own car. Then he hauled out a pistol and shot all four tires. He reloaded and emptied the rest of his bullets into the engine compartment.

"He killed it," the police chief said. "First case of autocide I've ever handled."

Now, here's the question: did *the car* make *the driver* angry?

No. A car can't do that. Anger is how the driver *chose* to react to the situation.

As author John Ortberg puts it: "lots of people have the power to hurt or frustrate me. *Only one* has the power to make me angry – me."

Our feelings of anger do not originate with other people or situations. To believe that they do is to be shifting the blame for how we feel.

Myth number two: "I just can't control my anger ... and no one should expect me to."

Anger certainly is a powerful emotion. It can actually cause chemical changes in your body.

But no matter how strong your feelings of anger may be, you still have a choice: "What will I do with this emotion I am feeling? How will I *express* this anger? Will I be quick to listen and slow to speak? Or will I be quick to speak and slow to listen?"

Again, Ortberg writes:

"If it is true that no one else can make me angry, it is even more true that no one else can make me respond aggressively or inappropriately when I feel anger. It often *seems* that way because my *response* to feeling anger has become so routine that it seems 'automatic.'

"But the truth is that my response is *learned behavior*. I learned it long ago, from people I grew up around, learned it so informally that I was not aware that I was learning anything.

“The good news is that what can be learned can also be unlearned. It is possible for me to manage my anger in a God-honoring way: to ‘be angry and sin not.’

Then he concludes:

“Anger is an inescapable fact of life. What I do with that anger, how I express and manage it, is another matter. The *experience* of anger is different from the *expression* of anger.”ⁱⁱⁱ

The Why Question

But I don’t want to talk about that. I don’t want to talk about anger management or *thumos* or the power of anger (said the man who just spent seven minutes talking about those things).

Instead, what I want to talk about this morning is the *why* question.

- *Why*, if God’s plan for us when things don’t go the way we want or we feel stressed ...
- *Why*, if God’s plan for us is to be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry (which, by the way is how He handles Himself – most clearly exemplified in Jesus of Nazareth as He endured the rejection of His people and, ultimately, the cross) ...
- *Why*, if God’s plan for us is to be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry ... *why* are we so quick to become angry? *Why*, for so many of us, is there a beneath-the-surface simmering pot of offense and indignation that is always ready to boil over and scald the people around us?

I think if you can answer the *why* question you can turn down the temperature and/or drain the pot. It will take you a long way towards being able to implement James’ instruction. If you can answer the *why* question, then becoming a person who truly is “quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry” will be for you more than just a pious platitude. It will become a realistic possibility. And you and the people around you will begin to experience a level of peace that you didn’t know was possible.

And the reason I am so convinced of this is because of what I learned at that retreat five years ago and what I’ve seen play out in my life again and again since then. After Bob (our retreat leader) asked me if I was an angry person ... *and* my test results confirmed it ... *and* the person I live with also confirmed it, he said “behind the mad is the sad.”

And what he meant by that (and I understood this because of some of the things he had said in teaching sessions) ... what he meant by that was that anger was a secondary emotion; that there was something else hidden behind it that was energizing it, fueling it and keeping it alive; and that whatever that was, it was in some way grievous to me and painful. Behind the mad is the sad.

And then he asked me, “So, Rick, what hurts?”

And I didn’t know, because quite frankly, I’d never thought about it. So I spent the rest of the time at that retreat thinking about that and asking God to reveal to me, “What hurts? Why am I angry?”

And I know some of you right now are thinking, “Wow, our pastor has just fallen off the cliff into Psychobabble Purgatory.” And I don’t blame you for thinking that because that’s kind of how I felt at first ... until I realized that what Bob was saying wasn’t much different than the idea of how hitting your thumb with a hammer first causes pain and then what? Anger follows. We say “#?!W#@@”!!!

And if you *keep* hammering your thumb, eventually it swells up and becomes infected. And it hurts all the time even when it isn’t being hammered. And you will be irritable all the time. Emotionally, it works the same way. In fact, the other word the Greeks had for anger (and this is actually the word that James uses) has this imagery associated with it.

The word is *orge* (or-gay) which comes from the word *orgaô* which means “to swell up.” And it conveys the idea of an infected, painful swelling which eventually bursts.^{iv}

Orge is the anger that comes from pain that has become deeply established in our hearts.

It’s not like *thumos* which comes and goes (although if you have lots and lots of *thumos* going on, chances are there is *orge* at the root). Instead, *orge* seethes and smolders.

And though it can show itself in raging explosions, most of the time *orge* shows up as a general dissatisfaction ... *with everything*. It’s judgmental, critical and complaining. It turns us into a person who is unhappy, unpleasant, unreasonable, unreachable, unteachable, unsympathetic, unappreciative, unfriendly, unlikeable, unpopular, and, to echo what James wrote, unholy.

Remember what he said? “Human anger” – and the word he uses is, you guessed it, *orge* – “*orge* does not bring about the righteousness that God desires.” It does not bring about justice. It does not set things right. It only makes things worse ... for everyone.

Orge is what Paul warned about when he wrote to the Ephesians:

Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry (orge), and do not give the devil a foothold.
Ephesians 4:26-27 (NIV)

In other words, if you let the offenses of day-to-day life keep adding to the emotional swelling and the infection – if *orge* keeps growing in you instead of being drained off – you might as well open the door and say, “Come on in, Satan, and ruin my life” because that’s what’s going to happen.

And some of you know exactly what I’m talking about because I just described your life. You are unhappy, unpleasant, unreasonable, unreachable, unteachable ... and all those other un-words I just said. And the minions of Satan are having a field day with you.

But don’t take it personally, because *I just described my life, too*, five years ago. I had no idea at the time what sad – what emotional infection and swelling – was behind my mad and I just kept adding to it little by little every day.

By the way (and I’ll just throw this in for free), if you’re a guy, you are particularly susceptible to *orge*. Not that many women don’t also have a problem with it, but the way men are socialized in this culture only exacerbates the problem.

As I was preparing for this message, I came across an incredibly insightful quote from Gary and Carrie Oliver in their

book, *Raising Sons and Loving It*:

Anger is often the only emotion that a male is aware of though they've surely experienced a myriad of other emotions as well. For just below the surface, a man has many other, deeper emotions that need to be identified and acknowledged ... fear, hurt, frustration, disappointment, vulnerability and a longing for connection.

[However] boys learn early that ...

- Anger can help them deflect attention from these more painful emotions.
- Anger is safe, and it provides some protection for the frightened and vulnerable self.
- Anger helps him avoid or at least minimize his pain.
- Anger provides a surge of energy. It decreases his vulnerability and increases his sense of security.
- What's more, he tells himself, all real men get angry.

In short, boys learn quickly that it's easier to feel anger than it is to feel pain.^v

Or, in the terminology of our retreat counselor, Bob: it's easier to feel the mad than it is to face the sad ... or any other emotion that's uncomfortable.

When my girls were little, I can remember times when they were in danger and I was afraid for them, but it came out as anger. "What are you doing!? What are you thinking!? Don't you know you're going to hurt yourself!? Where's your mother!? How could you let her do this?! Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah."

Not So Great Expectations

Ok, I think you get the point. The issue is *orge* anger – the kind of anger that's tied to some other hidden emotional swelling or trauma. And James is saying when something happens that you don't like, be careful not to react out of that first.

But the question is ... where does this swelling come from? What sad exists behind the mad? What hurts?

James actually answers that question in the fourth chapter of his letter, where he directly speaks to the arguments and fights that were consistently breaking out among the little Christian communities to which he had sent this letter. We read this last week and we talked about it but I think it will make even more sense this week.

James asked:

What is causing the quarrels and fights among you? Don't they come from the desires at war within you? You want what you don't have, so you scheme and kill to get it. You are jealous of what others have, but you can't get it, so you fight and wage war to take it away from them. James 4:1-2 (NLT)

Last week we said that James was telling them "The reason for your fights is the demand for your rights – what you want and what you think you deserve that you are not getting."

But James goes on to add one more important thought:

You do not have because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures. James 4:3 (NIV)

The issue with this group of people – the reason there was so much conflict and anger not only towards each other but also towards God – was *their unmet expectations*.

They wanted what someone else had and they didn't get it. They wanted to be treated a certain way and they weren't. And when they asked God for those things (finally, after being demanding of one another), He didn't come through in the way they expected either!

- He didn't make the persecution from the Romans and the Jewish Temple leaders go away.
- He didn't make them rich with the things of the world (which, if you read this whole letter, was a huge issue).

So, within this group of people there was huge level of disappointment. As I've said each week, they had been thrown out of their synagogues and in some cases thrown out of their families for their belief that Jesus was the Messiah. And all they had was one another. But that wasn't a piece of cake either because, as those of us who are Christians know well, Christians are still sinners. The rich people weren't sharing with the poor people. The poor people were sucking up to the rich people. I mean, it was a mess.

And there was a lot anger – a lot of *orge* anger – that had had developed because of the unmet expectations. That was the sad behind the mad.

And what's fascinating to me is that that's almost always the case when it comes to the simmering-below-the-surface easily-hurt and often-offended kind of anger. It's almost always unmet expectations that creates and inflames *orge*.

That's what it was for me. During that retreat, as I took time to think about what Bob had asked me – “what hurts? What's the sad behind the mad?” – I realized it came down to disappointment and pain related to people who had not met my expectations. And I made a long list of ...

- People who had gotten mad and left the church.
- People who had helped me start the church and had simply decided it was time to move on.
- People who I tried to help but didn't listen and then blamed me for the mess they were in.
- People who hadn't appreciated me the way I thought they should have.

I had a long list of people who had not measured up to my expectations; who had hurt me and disappointed me. And I had never done anything about that. And my emotional thumb – after being hammered for so many years – was swollen and infected and easily irritated.

And some of you can relate to that. Some of you, if you took the time and thought about it, you'd realize the same thing. People you expected better of let you down time after time. And it hurt. And it got swollen. And you've been mad ever since – maybe not thumos mad but *orge* anger has been building and building in you.

For some of you the issue isn't so much people as it is just life hasn't worked out like you expected. You thought by this time you would be married and have children. You thought you'd be further along in your career. You thought you'd be able to retire. You thought you would live in a nicer house. You never thought you'd gain 40 pounds or have gray hair.

You never thought you would get cancer ... or have to bury one of your children.

But that's how it's turned out. It's been one thing after another.

And there's a deep sadness that you rarely tap into. All you know is that you just feel like life sucks and some days you feel like you could scream. But what good would it do?

And for some of you, the issue isn't so much people or life as it is God. After all, if God was really doing what God should do – what you *expect* God to do – the people and your life would all work out. And not just *your* life – if God did what God should do, there wouldn't be an ISIS. There wouldn't be pilots who intentionally crash planes into mountain. There wouldn't be so much violence and hatred between people.

In you, there's a deep disappointment with God – a deep sadness because you feel like God has let you down. And though you would never shake your fist and rail against Heaven, whenever you hear someone talk about how God is working in their life, you're skeptical and jaded. Or you get easily irritated when the pastor talks about the church and what the church is doing and especially the money it needs to do those things. In the words of one of the people on my list years ago, "it's all just a big money grab."

That's *orge* anger.

Reducing the Swelling

And I'm sure we could add to the litany if we had time ... but at this point, I think the most important question is ... what does it take to kill the infection? What will it take for the swelling to go down?

I'll tell you what I've learned and what's helped me (though I still have a long way to go on this). You've got to face it, forgive it (and maybe lament it), repent of it and then repeat it. Let's work through those one at a time.

1. Face it.

You have got to identify the sad behind the mad. You have got to take time to really think about this and it may take time. It may take weeks. Ask God to reveal it to you.

"Search me, O God, and know my heart; Try me and know my anxious thoughts; and see if there be any hurtful way in me, And lead me (out of that) into the everlasting way (lead me into the way of life)."
Psalm 139:24

First step is face it.

2. Forgive it or lament it, or maybe both.

Forgiving means to release the people who have hurt you from the debt they owe you even though they don't deserve it. And when I went through this process that's what I had to do. I had to go through the list of all the people and go, "Paid in full; paid in full...you don't owe me anything." I still have to do it on a regular basis with some of those people, "paid in full; forgive; release."

By lament it I mean bring your complaint about your life or God's actions or inactions directly to Him. And if you feel awkward doing that, you need to know that 2/3rds of the Psalms are exactly that: prayers of lament where the writer brings his complaint to God and says "God, you've got to help me understand this. And if you can't help me understand this, at least help me live with this and you've got to help me know that this is not how it's going to be in the end."

So, when you identify this then you have to forgive it or lament it, or maybe both.

3. Repent of it.

This is kind of weird because you think, "wait a minute, life hasn't worked out like I expected. People haven't treated me like I expected. God hasn't acted like I expected. Why, God? Why am I the one repenting here?"

Well, you know the word "hurtful" (in that scripture from Psalms 139) could also be translated "idolatrous." So another way to read David's prayer is, "God, show me where these hurts have become idols in my life. Show me where I am bowing down to them and allowing them to rule over me instead of You."

And a lot times that's what's going on when we have orge anger. The hurt rules us like a god. And that's called idolatry ...

... which is an issue James actually raises when he writes:

Wash your hands, you sinners; purify your hearts, for your loyalty is divided between God and the world. Let there be tears for what you have done. Let there be sorrow and deep grief. Let there be sadness instead of laughter, and gloom instead of joy.
James 4:7-9 (NLT)

Repent of it and instead of the bad news of failed expectations being the central part of your life, the driving force in your life, let the Good News of Jesus have that place. The Good News is that because of what God did through Jesus, we can be sure he will redeem and use every failed expectation and every failure on our part. He really does make beautiful things out of the dust. And we can be sure that it is not always going to be like it is because one day he is coming back with justice to set all things right.

So, face it, forgive or lament it, repent of it ...then, finally ...

4. Repeat it.

For the rest of your life, over and over, you will need to work through this process on a regular basis. Some people need to do it weekly or monthly, especially when you first begin to integrate it into your life.

For me, at least once a year, I have to take a block of time and get alone by myself and go through this process. And stuff comes up that I had no idea was bothering me. I have to forgive, lament and repent. And I do that because I don't want to be angry all the time. I don't want to live a life of regret for the damage that my anger has caused to my wife, my kids, and people I love and care about. I don't want to live that way.

And I don't have to. And neither do you.

Because God has revealed to us a better way: quick to listen, slow to speak and the most important part of all ... slow to become angry.

Closing Questions

Now, as we close, I want to take a few minutes for some self-reflection. I'm going to ask a few questions and I want you to either write down an answer or think of an answer – it's up to you.

- Would people around me say that I am an angry person?
- Do I have an issue with *thumos* – occasional flashes of anger that need to be better controlled?
- Do I have an issue with *orge*? Is there underlying and unresolved emotional swelling and infection?
- Who do I need to forgive – to release from the debt they owe – for not meeting my expectations?
- What do I need to lament – to grieve over – where life or God has not met my expectations?
- Given the fact that I live in a sin-cursed world, what expectations do I need to adjust going forward?
- How could the Good News of Jesus become more central in my life?

CLOSING COMMENTS

1. Next Sunday ... Easter. Move up and in for our guests ... leave the closest spaces for guests ... get here a bit earlier so you can get a seat early.
2. Offering as you leave ...
3. See you at the Tenebrae Wednesday at 7pm.

Endnotes

ⁱ Darius Rucker, Don't Think I Don't Think About It, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3HsYNUU19MM>

ⁱⁱ <http://www.artofmanliness.com/2013/03/11/got-thumos/>

ⁱⁱⁱ From Preaching Today, John Ortberg, Having Anger with No Sin. It Is Not Easy, But It Is Possible.

^{iv} Vines "Anger" 3709

^v Gary Oliver, Carrie Oliver, Raising Sons and Loving It!