

Can We Talk?
Firestarter
June 21, 2020

Good morning everyone!

Thank you all for making the effort to be here in the room today ...

And also, thank you to everyone who is tuning in online whether you're livestreaming or watching at a later time.

As Shannon said, today we are continuing in our series "Can We Talk?" because apparently, when it comes to those outside of our "tribe," we can't – at least not without a level of mean-spiritedness that, frankly, I've never seen before in my life.

And it seems to be getting worse, which, as a citizen of this country, bothers me greatly,

because as long as this kind of interaction continues, we're never going to come up with solutions to the complex problems we're facing these days.

When people horribilize the "other side" (and, in our culture right now, that repeatedly happens from *both* sides) ...

When people horribilize the other side and speak to them and treat them accordingly, that side has no interest or incentive to negotiate and compromise. And nothing gets solved.

Or, it gets "solved" by force – whether that force comes from the power of The State or from anarchists – which only serves to exacerbate the initial problem.

But, as concerned as I am about our nation at large, I am even more disturbed by the level

of meanness that currently characterizes *communication between Christians* – people who claim to believe in and follow Jesus as their savior and Lord – over our political and cultural issues.

It's one thing for people of the world to horribilize one another and speak to each other and treat each other as villains, but when Christians do it, something is very, very wrong with our "religion."

And that's not just my opinion. It's also the opinion of "Pastor James," the brother of Jesus, who was the leader of the very first church ever, which began in Jerusalem shortly after Jesus was crucified.

And, by the way, as I like to point out from time to time, the fact that a church ...

- Even *began* ...

- And continued *not only to exist* ...
- But, also, was able *to spread and expand* in spite of persecution ...
- *After* its founder was killed by the Romans ...

... is an incredible piece of secular historical evidence that Jesus of Nazareth really did rise from the dead.

That's because he wasn't the first of that era to go round claiming to be the Jewish Messiah. Roman historians of that time tell us that there were three or four in the 75 or so years before him ...

- Each of whom gathered a large following

- Each of whom were crucified by the Romans
- And each of whom had their movements die along with them as their followers dispersed.

But that didn't happen to the followers of Jesus. Unlike the others, *they persisted*.

And, what's even more fascinating is that their persistence wasn't based on the *message* of Jesus, as radical as it was and is.

It was based on their claim that they had seen Him alive after his death – and not just seen Him, but had regularly hung out with Him, and eaten dinner with Him over a period of six weeks before He disappeared into Heaven!

Anyway, that's how and why the church began in the first place. Pretty amazing stuff.

And James, the brother of Jesus – who himself didn't believe in and follow Jesus until *after* he saw Jesus alive – James was the pastor of this church.

And, if you've been here for either of the first two messages in this series, you know we've been looking at part of a letter he wrote to members of that church – and he had to write to them because they had been forced by persecution to flee Jerusalem.

And that was very hard on them and they were very stressed about it. They were discouraged and disillusioned.

And, apparently, because things weren't going well, they were speaking to each other and treating each other very poorly (just like we do when we're in those kinds of situations), which is why, at one point in his

letter ...

James tells them ...

*Those who consider
themselves religious ...*

Those who think of themselves as spiritually mature; those who think they are walking with God and living according to God's will ...

*... and yet do not keep a tight
rein on their tongues ...*

Those who can't control the words that come out of them – whether it's literally off their tongue or what they post on social media ...

*Those who consider
themselves religious and yet
do not keep a tight rein on
their tongues ...*

Those who claim to be Christians but use

their words as weapons ...

... deceive themselves ...

They're kidding themselves.

*.. and their religion is
worthless. James 1:26
(NIV)*

Something is very, very wrong with it.

But James wasn't interested in pointing a finger and shaming them – or us, because many of us are guilty of the same kind of hypocrisy ...

And maybe not in relation to any of the cultural stuff that's going on; maybe it's just the way we talk to our family or the people we work with.

James isn't interested in shaming anyone.

He's interested in helping. He's interested in being part of the solution, so he gives them very specific guidance concerning what their communication should look like.

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

Here we go ... read it with me.

*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)
- And *then*, after we've poured out our angry words, we *might* listen in an effort to understand.

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)

And, again, as I've said each week, 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.

So, James isn't talking about salvation. In fact, that word would probably be better translated as "justice." *Human anger doesn't bring about the justice that God desires in*

everyday life. In the end, it doesn't make things right.

Two Angry Words

And that's a very important idea that we'll come back to in just a bit ... but first I need to tell you that the Greeks had two different words to describe anger. And both of them are found in our New Testament and simply translated as "anger."

And, unless you have a Greek Bible or a good commentary (or a knowledgeable pastor), you wouldn't know the difference.

One of those words, *thumos*, is the word they used to describe a surface level anger which rises and passes rapidly.

It actually comes from another 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 and said a few choice words, you've experienced *thumos*.
- If you've ever felt angry when your family and property are threatened, you've experienced *thumos*.
- If you've ever felt driven to stand up for what you believe is right or against what you think is wrong, you've experienced *thumos*. (*Thumos* is the emotion behind a lot of the protesting we're seeing right now).

... which is why *thumos* can actually be a powerful force for good.ⁱ

Of course, this is also the trap of *thumos*.

Because it feels so "right," it's easy to keep lighting it up and letting it burn to the point of destruction.

Do that often enough and the brief flare up of *thumos* can turn into a raging forest fire or worse ... which is why ...

The ancient Hebrew writers tell 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.

- Count to 10
- Bite your tongue
- Redirect

However, I'm not going to talk about *thumos* anger ... because *thumos* is not the word James uses here.

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*.

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

Here's the first one: anger is externally driven.

In other words, "It's not my fault that I'm angry. Something happened that hurt me; something happened that I didn't like, and it just made me mad."

Ever said thought that? Ever said that?

I have.

But it's not true. That's not how it works.

My feelings of anger do not originate with other people or situations because anger is only one of many responses *I can choose* to those people or situations. I mean, I *could* choose to ignore those people or situations. I don't *have* to be angry.

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."

So, myth number one – anger is externally driven. It just happens to us.

Myth number two is that anger is uncontrollable.

And anger certainly is a powerful emotion. It can literally cause chemical changes in your body.

But, no matter how strong your feelings of anger may be at any given moment, 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.”ⁱⁱ

The Why Question

But I don’t want to talk about *thumos* anger in this message.

Instead, what I want to talk about is the *other* kind of anger – the one James refers to in his letter.

And to understand that kind of anger, we need to start with the *why* question.

- *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 that pot. Answering the *why* question 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.

... which is so much better than the alternative that James describes:

Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. James 3:5 (NIV)

By answering the *why* question, instead of starting fires with your communication and burning down people and relationships, you and they could begin to experience more and more *peace*; and maybe even at a level you didn't know was possible.

And the reason I am so convinced of this is because of something I learned at a retreat about a decade ago; something that I've seen confirmed in my life again and again since then.

And some of you have heard me talk about this before. In fact, I mentioned it briefly in a message a couple of months ago, that one of the greatest days of my life was when Bob, the retreat leader, said to me offline, in a private conversation ...

“Behind the mad is the sad.”

And what he meant by that was ...

- That anger is a secondary emotion.
- That there is often something else hidden behind it that energizes it, fuels it, and keeps it alive.

- And that whatever it is, it's in some way grievous and painful.

"Behind the mad is the sad," he said.

And then the question that really got me, "So, Rick, what hurts?"

And I didn't know, because quite frankly, I'd never really thought about it.

I'd never made the connection between emotional pain and anger, which is kind of silly because we all know what happens when you experience physical pain, like when you accidentally trip and fall or you accidentally hit your thumb with a hammer.

What's the sequence?

It's pain followed by anger.

You hit your thumb, which hurts, and then you say some things in anger. Right?

Now, here's something to think about.

What happens if you're terrible with tools and you keep hammering your thumb?

Eventually your thumb swells up and becomes infected. And it hurts *even when it isn't being hammered*. Even a little tap produces a great amount of irritation and anger.

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 in his letter ...

The other word the Greeks had for anger the has this exact same imagery associated with it.

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

***Orge* is the anger that comes from pain that has become deeply rooted in our heart.**

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* smolders and bubbles deep beneath the surface.

And though it can occasionally reveal itself in raging explosions, most of the time *orge* shows up as a general dissatisfaction ... *with everything*.

It's judgmental, critical, and complaining.

Left unchecked, over time 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 *orge* – “human *orge* does not bring about the justice that God desires.”

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 that personally because *I just described my own life* a decade 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 without realizing it.

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.

Several years ago, I came across an incredibly insightful quote from Gary and Carrie Oliver in their book, *Raising Sons and Loving It*.

They write, "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.”^{iv}

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.

Disappointment

Ok, I think you get the point.

The issue is *orge* anger – the kind of anger that’s tied to some deep-seated emotional swelling or trauma.

And James is saying “don’t let that be driving your interactions and communication with others because it won’t make things the way they ought to be; the way God wants them to be. *Orge* does not bring about justice. It only compounds the problem.”

... which is exactly what we're seeing in our culture right now.

So, the obvious question is ... where does the swelling come from? What is the sad that exists behind the mad? What hurts?

Turns out that James actually deals with that issue in the fourth chapter of his letter, where he directly speaks to the arguments and fights that were constantly breaking out among the followers of Jesus to whom he had sent this letter.

He writes:

*What is causing the quarrels
and fights among you?*

That's a really good question, James. Why don't you help us out?

▣ “Ok, how about this?”

Don't they come from the desires at war within you?

Ummm ... I'm not sure I understand what you mean, James.

“OK, here it is, I'll spell it out.”

You want what you don't have, so you scheme and kill to get it.

Not literally, but with your words.

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)

“The reason there is a constant level of anger – orge – in you, is tied to a demand for your rights – what you want, and what you think

you deserve, that you are not getting ... that someone else is.”

This was issue with these Christ-followers – the reason there was so much conflict and anger – was ...

- 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 on top of that even God had let them down.

- He didn't prevent the persecution from the Romans and the Jewish Temple leaders, which is why they had to flee.
- He didn't make them rich with the things of the world (which, if you read this

whole letter, was a huge issue).

Point being ... within this group of people there was huge level of disappointment and jealousy.

And there was a lot of anger – a lot of orge anger – that had developed over time because of it.

Disappointment with God and each other 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 wounded, and often offended kind of anger. It's almost always disappointment over 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.

- All the 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.

Unbeknownst to me, there was a very large group of very bad people (in my mind) who had not measured up to my expectations. And I was disappointed and hurt over that.

And my emotional thumb – after being hammered for so many years – was swollen and infected and easily irritated. My anger was always simmering just beneath the surface and it took very little to set it off.

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* anger 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.

Or ...

- You never thought you'd gain 40 pounds or have gray hair.

- You never thought you would get cancer.
- You never thought you'd 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 a pandemic.
- There wouldn't be police officers who abuse their power
- There wouldn't be rioters who destroy the property of innocent people
- There wouldn't be so much violence and hatred.

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 probably 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 helps the swelling to go down?

I'll tell you what I've learned and what's helped me since I first became aware of all

this ... though, I should add that I still have a long way to go on this. I still struggle with this.

But here's the deal: *you've got to name it, forgive it (and maybe lament it), repent of it and then repeat it.*

So, let's work through those one at a time.

1. Name it.

You've got to identify the sad behind the mad.

You've 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 (NASB)

First step is name it. Second is to ...

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

Forgiving simply means to release the people who have hurt you from the debt they owe you even though they don't deserve it.

And whenever I go through this process here's what I do.

I make a list of all the people who have disappointed me in some way, and then beside each name I write "paid in full" because I have decided I am going to release them from the demand that they somehow suffer for the suffering they have caused me. I'm not going to demand an "eye for an eye" from them.

Instead, I am declaring that my suffering – my

pain – will be enough for both of us. That's what forgiveness is.

By "lament it" I mean, you bring your complaint about your life or God's actions and inactions directly to Him, which is what two-thirds of the Old Testament writing known as The Psalms are about.

They're known as "prayers of lament" where the writer says "God, I'm not going to play games and pretend. I'm disappointed and hurt and angry with You over this."

A lot of people are surprised to learn that God is actually OK with this; that some of the most despondent and angry prayers you'll ever read are actually *in* the Bible.

So, once you identify the sad and name it, then you have to forgive it or lament it, or maybe both.

3. Then you have to repent of it.

You have to say “the way I’m handling this is wrong and I need to change.”

That’s kind of hard 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. So, why am I the one having to say that?”

Well, you know the word “hurtful” (in that scripture from Psalms 139) could also be translated “idolatrous.”

... which means that 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 of times that's what's going on when we are filled with orge anger. The hurt we feel rules us like a god. And that's called idolatry and why, if we're Christians, we have to repent.

We have to confess "I'm letting the *bad news* of failed expectations and disappointment be the driving force in my life. And I don't want to live that way. Instead, I want to be driven the *Good News* of Jesus."

And that Good News is that we know (because of what God did in the resurrection of Jesus) ...

We know God will redeem and use every failed expectation, every disappointment and every injustice. As the song we sometimes sing puts it: He really does make beautiful things out of the dust.

So, to ratchet down the orge anger, we have to name the sad, forgive and/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, I have to take a block of time and get alone by myself and go through this process several times a year. And stuff comes up that I had no idea was bothering me and I have to forgive, lament and repent.

And I do that because ...

- I don't want to be angry and mean all the time.

- I don't want to be driven by the demand for my rights.
- I don't want to be a Firestarter – someone who continually torches people and relationships because I haven't dealt with the disappointment that comes simply from living in a sin-cursed world.
- 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.

Reflection

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 you say that you are an angry person?
- Do you have an issue with *thumos* – occasional flashes of anger that need to be better controlled?
- Do you have an issue with *orge*? Is there underlying and unresolved emotional swelling and infection?
- Who do you need to forgive – to release from the debt they owe – for not meeting your expectations?
- What do you need to lament – to grieve

over – where life or God has not met your expectations?

- Given the fact that you live in a sin-cursed world, what expectations do you need to adjust going forward?
- How could the Good News – and example – of Jesus become more central in your life?

We're going to take a few minutes to reflect on that as we sing one more song together, then I'll come back for some closing comments.

So, let's stand together as we do.

1. Next Sunday – final message “Speak Life” ... how our words can produce life instead of death; blessing instead of

cursing.

2. Before then ... this week watch your email and FB for a special video message from me about a couple of issues we're needing to address pretty quickly as a church.

3. Offering ...

Endnotes

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

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

ⁱⁱⁱ Vines "Anger" 3709

^{iv} Gary Oliver, Carrie Oliver, Raising Sons and Loving It!