

“Taming the Temper”

Ephesians 4:26, 27

Pastor Dan Erickson

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Two-year-old children are delightful creatures. But they tend to occasionally have temper tantrums. If they don't get what they want, when they want it, they often express their displeasure in a *not so nice* way. Unfortunately, it is not just two year olds who have temper tantrums. People who are 22, 52, 82 or 102 can lose their temper. Eugene Schneider of Carteret, New Jersey, age 46, got angry when a divorce court ordered him to divide his property equally with his wife. He then cut the couples four-bedroom home in half. Some of you remember that a sibling quarrel resulted in a garage being sawed in two north of Nashwauk a few years ago. Those are examples of adult temper tantrums.

Friends, as we have studied Ephesians 4 we have noted that a Christian has a new relationship with God through Jesus Christ. If that is the case, then there also should be changes in how we live. Before Christmas we talked about verse 25 and focused on God's instructions to stop lying and tell the truth. Today in verses 26 and 27 we will see that another change God desires in our lives is that we avoid temper tantrums.

Most of us realize that someone who cannot control his/her anger has a problem. As Bob Savage said, “When we let off steam, we often get ourselves into more hot water.” More important, an out of control temper is also a sin. Through the Apostle Paul, the Lord tells us **Ephesians 4: 26, 27 Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil.** This is similar to what the Apostle James says, **James 1:19b, 20 Let every person be quick to hear slow to speak, slow to anger, for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God.** Now, many Christians struggle with controlling their anger. Some of you have told me it is an issue for you, and few have demonstrated that to be the case. Yet, the fact it is a common sin doesn't mean it is not a serious one. Sinful anger can injure other people and can also eat away at your own soul. As we explore our text, my hope is that the Lord would help us see why it is important to get control of our tempers and how that can happen in each of our lives. Let's pause and pray the Lord would enable us to hear and heed His word today.

First thing to note is that not all anger is sinful. In fact sometimes it is good to be angry. **Ephesians 4:26a** says **Be angry and do not sin.** Or as the NIV reads, **In your anger do not sin.** This clearly implies it is possible to be angry with doing anything wrong. That is what happens when Jesus throws the money changers out of the temple in Matthew 21. Jesus is angry, but He does not sin. His anger was appropriate because it was a righteous response to the evil He encountered. Now, I see far too much anger being expressed in our culture and even within the church. I am a big advocate of civil and courteous conversation. I often quote **2 Timothy 2: 24, 25a the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone...patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness.** Folks, those are words from God. Yet, we also need to remember that sometimes it is important to be angry. A few years ago a friend of mine said, “Dan, I have never seen you angry.” He witnessed me expressing that anger. It was a reminder, however, for me to wonder if I am angry enough about certain things.

Henry Beecher, an early 19th century preacher, said, “A man who does not know how to be angry does not know how to be good. A man who doesn't ever feel indignation is either a fungus or a wicked man.” When someone mocks God and his word, I should be angry. I know I would be upset if someone insulted my wife or other family members and friends. Thus, if I hear a comedian on TV mocking the Lord and talking about “mistakes God has made,” I should feel some anger. When religious leaders use Christianity as a cloak for their own greed and lust, it should irritate me. When communist or radical Islamist governments in various parts of the world murder their own people, that is reason for anger. I should be mad when I hear of pastors or teachers leading people astray by telling them there are many other paths to salvation besides Jesus Christ. These are good reasons to be angry.

When asked whether he thought apathy or ignorance was a bigger problem in our country, one young man replied, “I don't know and I don't care.” Folks, I am afraid some Christians rarely get angry because they don't know and they don't care. When Moses came down from the mountain

and saw the people of Israel worshipping the golden calf, he was furious. In righteous indignation he threw down the stone tablets. He should have been angry and he was. Yet, often we are so focused on our own comfort and convenience, so enamored with the idea of being tolerant toward those with different beliefs, that we are baffled by Moses's reaction. Some assume that when Jesus takes a cord and used it as a whip to drive the money changers out of the temple it is because He was having a bad day or something. But that is not the case. Jesus' expression of anger was the right response to the evil He encountered. There is a time for anger. Williams Jenkins, a Puritan pastor, got it right when he said, "Anger doesn't need to be eliminated, it needs to be sanctified."

Friends, maybe the message that God has for some of you today, a few of us, is that it's time to start getting angry at the evil around us. God has not called us to be wither apathetic or ignorant. He does not want us to be so preoccupied with our own comfort and convenience that we are ambivalent toward the darkness engulfing our world. Sometimes being faithful to the Lord means we need to be a little angry. Folks, I am confident the Apostle Paul would agree. However, that is not really his concern in this text. Aristotle once said, "Anyone can become angry. That is easy, but to be angry with the right person, at the right time, and in the right way, that is not easy." Or as he puts it...

Second, in your anger, do not sin. In other words, avoid sinful feelings and expressions of anger. Paul knows anger is fertile soil in which sin can grow. Yes, sometimes we should be angry. There are times, I think, when becoming angry is not a virtue, but neither is it a sin. For example, when a basketball team loses a close game because of a questionable call by an official, anger is a common reaction of players, coaches and fans. I am not a mechanically minded person, so often when I am trying to fix something or put something together, things don't quite work out like they should. I usually end up feeling frustrated and maybe a little angry. Now, I don't know that Jesus would get angry in any of these situations, but sometimes anger seems to be an emotional reaction over which we have little control. If you accidentally hit your thumb with a hammer, I suspect you will feel not only pain, but a bit of anger. Yet, even if that initial reaction of anger is

okay, if you don't properly control it, it quickly becomes a sin.

To avoid having our anger become sinful we need to do two things...

Number one... We need to express our anger in an appropriate way. If I am upset because my internet connection is slow, it is not right for me to snap at Nancy or Brett. It is sinful to allow one's temper to blow up and have fragments scattered all over, hurting innocent people around us. It is also wrong to express anger by seeking revenge. "Don't get mad, get even," may be a nice sounding slogan, but it is not found in the Bible. Instead **Romans 12:17** says, **Do not repay anyone evil for evil.** It is also almost always wrong to express our anger in a way that fuels tension or conflict. That is why, even if our anger is justified, we still should not lash out at another person. **Proverbs 15:1** **A gentle answer turns away wrath.** Folks, that is true whether we have a right to be angry with the other person or not. And friends, no matter how justified we may think our anger is, it is never an excuse for physical or verbal abuse. Screaming or swearing at someone because we are mad at them is simply wrong.

A few years ago, a study done at the university of Iowa discovered something that the Bible has taught all along. Venting anger, yelling and screaming when you are frustrated, hitting your spouse with a foam rubber bat when you are upset, or going out and playing paintball with someone whom you are mad at, are not emotionally healthy things to do. Yes, some psychologists have been encouraging people to do things like that for year, but the study found that people who supposedly vent their anger tend to become more and more aggressive in their behavior. Instead of venting, we need to express our anger in appropriate ways. This means we should learn to be a marksman with our temper and focus our anger in the right direction. Instead of directing our anger toward another person we need to focus on solving a problem or correcting a situation. For example, if dad is angry because Joey is not getting good grades in school, the emotional energy needs to be channeled not into yelling at his son, but into helping him do a better job. When we feel angry, we need to work at expressing that anger in an appropriate and God-honoring way.

Number 2... We need to get over our anger quickly. This seems to be Paul's biggest concern. In most cases, anger should die a very quick death. Anger's natural lifespan as an emotional reaction is certainly less than 24 hours. However, if we choose to nurse it along and care for it, our anger can stay alive and thrive for years. We call that bitterness and that is a sin. Paul says, **Ephesians 4:26b, do not let the sun go down on your anger.** Now, this maybe a figurative expression. Paul may simply mean, "Don't prolong your anger." Yet, it is a good practice to follow this literally. Before the sun goes down, before you go to bed at night, get rid of your anger. Don't wake up the next morning still angry at someone or something. It is certainly foolish for me to stay angry for two weeks because I had a flat tire on my car one morning, and it is even more foolish to be mad at another person for something that happened two weeks ago, much less two years ago.

Friends, when we don't get over anger quickly it hurts us in a couple of ways.

First, it can hurt us emotionally. We have already noted that yelling and screaming are not emotionally healthy. However, repressing our anger and keeping it bottled up inside is not a good thing to do either. Now, some Christian say that even if you are furious with someone, the right thing to do is just keep a smile on your face and whenever you see that person, just say, "Nice to see you." Yet, just keeping your anger inside can be emotionally destructive. When I was growing up our family made homemade root beer. That is my closest experience to brewing or distilling. We would set bottles in an old bathtub, because on occasion the pressure inside a bottle would become too great and caused it to explode. Friends if we harbor anger too long, if we allow it to turn into bitterness and hatred, it will eventually explode. Again, this doesn't mean we should vent our anger, but rather that we express it is a healthy way. Most important, we need to get over it. Yes, short term anger is often an emotional reaction. Long term anger, bitterness, is an act of the will. It is a choice we make.

Fred Buecher said, "Of the seven deadly sins, anger is probably the most fun. Many folks feast on their anger. The chief drawback, however, is that we are just devouring ourselves." Friends, if you are mad at someone for something that happened two weeks ago, two years ago, or two decades ago, you are choosing to be angry. The

other person is not making you angry. It is your choice and it is a sin. And it can be emotionally harmful.

Paul's big concern though, is the spiritual harm anger can cause. **Ephesians 4:27 And give no opportunity to the devil.** Or as other versions say, don't give the devil a foothold. That is an interesting phrase. Some suggest Paul is teaching that prolonged anger is a point of entry that opens one up to demonic attack. Other's believe Paul is simply saying that if we continue to be angry, we are doing exactly what Satan wants, because bitterness will consume our time and energy and keep us from trusting and serving the Lord. Either or both of those interpretations may be correct. What is clear is that if we nurse our anger, if we become bitter, we are then spiritually crippled and unable to live in a way that pleases God.

Prolonged anger may involve something which happened a long time ago. It has been 30 years and you cannot even remember exactly why you are mad at Frank, but you have not forgiven him. Or maybe it was 10 years ago, and you know exactly why you were angry, you remember every detail, and you are bitter toward him. Or it might be because something that happened this past week. Paula made a comment about you that is simply not true. She missed the sermon last month on lying. So now you are mad at her. Oh friends, don't give the devil a foothold. Get rid of that bitterness. It can bring emotional and spiritual harm to you, and it can do significant damage to our life together as a church. Anger is not a problem we should take lightly.

So, how do we get rid of sinful anger? These are things we all need to keep in mind in dealing with our own temper. Some of us also have a friends or family member who struggles with anger. He or she may be a wonderful person in most situations, but when they lose their temper it is a whole different story. These thing are things you can share with them, but do so gently, so they don't get mad at you.

First, if we want to get rid of sinful anger we need to make sure we are a genuine Christian. I have said this before, and will keep saying it because it is so important. You can't tame your temper through your own strength. Yes, an anger management class may help. But it is when we experience the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives

that we are really able to deal with anger in the right way. This happens when we turn to Jesus Christ and receive the salvation He offers. This is not about going to church, getting baptized, or being a spiritual person. When, by God's grace, you receive Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord you start to become a new person on the inside, a new person who is able to deal with anger in a much better way. Friends, if you are not a believer in Jesus Christ, I urge you to turn to Him today. If you are not sure what that means, we need to talk.

Second, we need to confess our sin of uncontrolled or prolonged anger to the Lord. Losing control of your temper is a sin, a serious sin, but it is not the unforgivable sin. Even if your temper has caused you to do or say things that have deeply hurt someone else, God is ready and willing to forgive you. When Jesus died on the cross, He died for people with bad tempers. So whether you have been bitter with someone for 30 years, or if you lost your cool with your spouse this morning, it is time to turn to the Lord, acknowledge and repent of your sin, and receive the forgiveness He offers. **1 John 1:9 If we confess our sins he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.** Folks, that is a wonderful promise for people who lose their temper at times.

Third, you need to forgive those with whom you are angry. And you also probably need to ask that person to forgive you for your bitterness. That is not easy to do, but it is important and it is worth it. I am thrilled when I see two people who have been angry with each other for years, turn to the Lord, forgive each other and be reconciled. Yet, even if the other person doesn't respond, even if he/she doesn't want to be reconciled, it is important that you get rid of the anger or bitterness you have in your heart. That has been hurting you far more than it hurts the other person anyway. It is a cancer to your soul. Ask the Lord to help you forgive those you think have wronged you.

Fourth, you need to ask the Lord to help you tame your temper and get control of your anger. Many folks have regrets over something they said or did because they were angry. Though the Lord is always ready to forgive us for our outbursts of anger, often the scars of what we said or did remain. When it comes to losing your temper, an ounce of prevention is often worth a whole tome

of cure. We need to ask the Lord to fill our hearts with love and compassion. We need to ask Him to help us get control of our tongues so that we will speak the truth with wisdom and love. We need to ask Him to help us keep an eternal perspective, so we remember that life is short and eternity is long. That should help you not get so upset about things that only make you feel unhappy for a very short time. As the Lord to help you get control of your temper.

A boy once asked, "Dad, how do wars begin?" "Well, son, take the first world war for example. That got started when Germany invaded Belgium." Immediately, his wife interrupted. "Tell him the truth. It started because someone was murdered." The husband snapped back, "Are you answering the question or am I?" Turning her back, the wife walked out of the room in a huff and slammed the door shut. An uneasy silence followed. Finally, the boy said, "Dad, you don't have to tell me how wars get started. I think I know now." Friends, **Ephesians 4: 26, 27 Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil.**