

Introduction

Good morning, Union Church. Over the last several weeks, we've been in a series on wisdom. And the primary thesis for this series is that all of us want to live well. We want to flourish. We want the good life. And yet, we don't have it. Each of us feel the tension between our desire to live a good, confident, flourishing life and our lived reality where we feel like we're floundering. And it's that tension that desperately drives us to Google, to therapists and counselors, to influencers. We're crying out, pleading: "Tell me how to live!"

But what we need, the Bible tells us, is not merely guides or manuals to living, but we need wisdom. We need to become wise people who can see the world around us rightly and respond with action and attitudes that will lead us toward flourishing.

Now, if we're going to do this—become wise people who can live in the world in a flourishing way—then one thing that each of us is going to deal with is anger.

It's pretty apparent to most of us, I think, that we are an angry, outraged people. Maybe it has always been this way. People were angry during the Revolutionary War. And yet, there is a common sentiment, I think, that we have gotten even more and more angry in recent years. In 2019, an NPR poll found that 84 percent of Americans believe that we are angrier today than we were a generation ago.[\[1\]](#) And that was before COVID!

It's here! And I know that because we have a lot of toddlers in our church. And toddlers are just seething with rage. And we have a lot of parents of toddlers in this church. And married people. And single people. And older people. And younger people. Anger is non-discriminatory. We all deal with it. So, the question is, how? How can we be wise in an angry culture? How can we deal with our own anger?

So, here's where we're going. This is a big topic. There is much that could be said about anger. So, to limit ourselves, to try and keep this sermon contained, we're going to look at what Proverbs has to say about anger—we'll supplement it a bit from the rest of the Bible, but I want to let Proverbs set our direction with the way it talks about anger.

There are three things that Proverbs tells us about anger:

1. Anger is destructively powerful.
2. Anger is usually dangerous.
3. Anger can be dissolved.

That's where we're going today. But before we do that, let's ask the Lord to help us.

I. **Anger is uniquely, destructively powerful.**

Did you hear the first verse of the passage that was read, from Proverbs 29: **“Scoffers set the city aflame.”** And like we talked about last week, scoffers are people characterized by a particularly angry version of pride. Anger can set a city ablaze.

At its core, anger is destructive. That’s what it does. Anger has a target, and it’s a target that it wishes to be destroyed. There’s a reason anger is so often compared to fire in the Bible. It has an explosive nature. Tim Keller called it the “dynamite of the soul.”^[2] It destroys.

When you’re angry, what is the natural impulse? Is it to build something? Is it to create something? Or is it to destroy something? There was a thing called a “rage retreat” that went viral for a few weeks last year, a trip out to the woods where women could let out their anger in “healthy” ways. Guess what they did? Did they quilt? Crochet? Have you ever seen an angry knitter? No! They beat sticks on the ground and yelled as loud as they could! Anger is an aggressive, destructive force. Even if you’ve seen an angry knitter, the fact that you can picture that in your head means anger has an aggressive, destructive flavor to it.

But Proverbs goes to great length to describe anger as particularly destructive to the person who wields it. Proverbs 14, for example, says that angry, passionate jealousy, makes the bones rot. I don’t think the Proverb writer meant this literally, but it’s true that anger is physically destructive! Prolonged anger leads to greater risk of heart disease, eating disorders, Type 2 diabetes, and—of course—driving accidents! Too much anger literally destroys your body.

But anger is also destructive to your soul. It destroys us inside out. Anger makes you foolish, unable to make wise decisions. Proverbs 14:29 - **he who has a hasty temper exalts folly.**” He lifts up foolishness for all to see! There’s a reason we say someone was *blind* with rage.” Anger often blinds us to reality! It gives us tunnel vision, which is foolish.

Anger destroys relationships: **Proverbs 12:18 – “... rash words are like sword thrusts”**

Proverbs 29:22-23: **“A man of wrath stirs up strife, and one given to anger causes much transgression.”** A wrathful person pierces others with words, stirs up strife and discord, and causes others to sin.

You all have been in situations like this: Where a small disagreement suddenly turned into a knock-down, drag-out brawl, because somebody got angry, which made someone else defensively angry, and all of the sudden emotions were out of control. This is what Proverbs 15:1 is hinting at: **“A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.”** Anger begets anger. Look at our political and cultural landscape. Anger doesn’t stop at one person. It’s volatile, contagious. And it destroys.

II. **Caveat: Anger can be a good thing.**

At this point: I have to make a caveat: Anger can be a good thing. And the reason we know that is because somewhere between half and two-thirds of the references to anger in the Bible are references to God's anger.

Now, for some, the concept of an angry God is immediately off-putting. The idea of an angry God is not appealing to us. We like the wise, old uncle version of God—not the fire and brimstone version. And yet the Word of God refers to his anger, his wrath, his fury.

There's the thing we have to understand about anger: Anger isn't destructive power in and of itself. It's not destruction for destruction's sake. It's purposeful. **Anger arises when something we love is threatened.** Anger is our response to danger, to injustice.

We get angry because people we love are threatened. Or our way of life is threatened. Or our ego or reputation is threatened. Anger isn't merely destruction for destruction's sake, it's destructive energy that targets a threat to something we love.

And this is actually incredibly good news for how we think about God! Because if you have a God who never gets angry, you have a God who doesn't love. Becky Pippert, who has written really helpfully on evangelism and apologetics for 40 years, has my favorite quote on this. She talks in one of her books about how she would get angry at the friends she had ruining their lives through drug abuse. And she says this:

“Love detests the thing that destroys the beloved.... And if I, a flawed and sinful woman, can feel this much pain and anger over someone's condition, how much more a morally perfect God who made them? If God were not angry over how we are destroying ourselves, then He wouldn't be good and He certainly wouldn't be loving. Anger isn't the opposite of love. Hate is, and the final form of hate is indifference.”^[3]

The reason God is angry is that he loves. He created this world to flourish in relationship to him. He is the most valuable, beautiful, wonderful thing in the universe, and we are meant to flourish by reflecting his image, loving him in all his infinite value, and living well according to his perfect rule.

But we have disrespected his name, valued other, destructive things over him, and disregarded the way of flourishing that he has given us—and we are headed toward destruction (and pulling others along with us). He is being dishonored, and we are being destroyed. Of course he's angry! If he rightfully values himself as God and us as his beloved, he should be angry.

There is an anger that is righteous, that is holy, that is good, that is actually an expression of love. This is the anger that God has, and it's the anger that can be, in our best moments, productive and good.

III. Anger is usually a bad, sinful, dangerous thing.

And yet, when the Bible talks about the anger of people, it most often talks about it as a dangerous thing, not a helpful resource. Go through Proverbs! Go through and try to find a verse that talks about anger positively. You won't find them! No, the message is: Anger is dangerous, to indulge in it is foolish! Listen to the theme of these verses:

“The vexation of a fool is known at once, but the prudent ignores an insult” – Proverbs 12:16.

“Whoever restrains his words has knowledge, and he who has a cool spirit is a man of understanding.” – Proverbs 17:27

“Make no friendship with a man given to anger, nor go with a wrathful man, lest you learn his ways and entangle yourself in a snare.” – Proverbs 22:24

Now, some of you are saying, in your heart: Jesus was angry! Jesus flipped tables! And that's true. Anger can be a good thing. But think about Jesus's teaching for a moment. Just think about what he taught in the Sermon on the Mount:

“Blessed are the meek... blessed are the merciful... blessed are the peacemakers...”

Nowhere does he say: “Blessed are the angry!” Yes, anger can be a good, productive, even loving force—but if anything, the Bible tends to err on the side of caution when it comes to anger. Though Jesus himself modeled perfect anger perfectly a few times, he never taught us to be angry, and often warned against it. Anger is not a force that is to normally, regularly be tapped into. It can be a useful tool, but it comes with serious risk, for a few reasons.

1. Our knowledge is imperfect.

Listen, anger is essentially judgment. We judge somebody guilty. Something or someone is at fault for something going wrong—and our anger, our displeasure, our frustration with them is an implicit judgment: “Guilty!” The problem is that we make poor judges. Because we have very limited knowledge.

This is something I have been so convicted of in the last year or so: I am so guilty of making quick assumptions of people. I make dozens of assumptions about people every day. And often, it's in judgment: that I know exactly why they made that decision, or what they meant by that phrase, or what they are thinking about me. And I have no clue. None!

I have glimpsed 1 percent of their life, and I assume I know 99. Our knowledge is limited! We don't make for good judges. God does. And that's why so much of what the Bible has to say about anger is saying: Quiet your anger—because God is the one who will judge!

Jesus said, in Matthew 7: **“Judge not, that you be not judged...Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do notice the log that is in your own eye?”** He says: You

are blind! You are blind to your own sins and idols and weaknesses, and yet you think you can see what's going on in somebody else's heart and mind!

Last week, I was getting the kids ready to go somewhere, I think we were going to somebody's house. And Ashley was going to meet us there, so it was just me. And I'm trying to get everybody ready, get the diaper bag, get waters, get snacks. And I told Judah to put his shoes on—and he's just fighting me on it. Judah likes me to do everything for him or with him, but I kept telling him: "Judah, I'm not going to put your shoes on. I have to get these other things ready. If you want to go to your friend's house, you need to put your shoes on so we can leave!" And he just kept whining and saying: "No, no, no, I don't want to. I want you to put my shoes on."

And I was getting more and more frustrated, and finally, I just said: "Judah, what is going on? We're going to your friend's house, I'm trying to get ready so you can do something fun! Why are you whining so much? Why won't you just put your shoes on? I don't get it!"

I didn't really expect an answer. He's a toddler. I was just frustrated. And he looked up at me, tears welling up, and he said: "Because my finger hurts!"

See, earlier that day, Judah had accidentally gotten a burn on his finger—he was trying to help vacuum and he'd stuck his finger under the vacuum—it wasn't a big deal, but it hurt him. And he was worried that if he tried to put his shoe on, it might make his finger hurt more.

And I had sat there, in my anger, and said: "Guilty!" I pronounced him worthy of judgment, because surely, he was just being disobedient out of spite and toddler preference.

Friends, you just don't know. You don't know whether the person who hasn't texted you back is just ignoring you—or if they had a death in the family. You don't know if the person who you feel slighted by really does look down on you or if they are intimidated by you.

We make everything about ourselves, about how we've been slighted and how we've been inconvenienced and we're totally missing the full picture. And that doesn't necessarily excuse the other person—Judah was significantly overplaying the impact of this finger wound. But if we recognize that our knowledge is limited, it might help us recognize that the thing we assume is a log might just be a speck.

2. Our passion is uncontrolled.

Anger is also risky because our passion is uncontrolled. Our emotions, our passions are uncontrollable for us. It's easy to start feeling anger and say: "This is justified, this anger. It appropriately matches the wrong."

But, very quickly, the anger has ballooned and far outweighs the initial slight. Anger is risky because our passions are often uncontrolled—and the longer we sit in our anger, the more the fire is stoked and stoked, and before you know it, what was intended to be a small slice of anger

at a particular problem becomes an atom bomb dropped on a whole person, a whole relationship. Once we indulge in a little anger, it quickly spreads.

Even if you're not the kind of person who lashes out verbally, to indulge in the feeling of anger, even just for a few minutes, is to tempt yourself to marinate in bitterness for weeks—weeks that become months, that become years. Anger is risky for us, because our passions are uncontrollable.

3. **Our love is disordered.**

And anger is risky for us because our loves are disordered. Yes, anger can be a great tool, powerful love focused to defend something that is being threatened. But a huge problem is that our loves are distorted. We love the wrong things, we love ourselves more than others, we love God less than we should. All our loves are disordered in our sin and brokenness. And because our love is disordered, of course our anger is disordered!

And that's exactly what happened to me and Judah. My anger was also wrong and sinful because my love was disordered, my priorities were all out of whack. In that moment, what was most important was that I loved God well by loving my children well. But in that moment, the thing that loomed large in my mind wasn't my spiritual well-being, it wasn't the well-being of my kids—what loomed large in that moment was that we were late.

What I loved most in that moment was not my son, or my God, but my reputation. And when my reputation was being threatened—I got angry.

And you know, being on time isn't a bad thing. And having a good reputation isn't a bad thing. A good name is better than riches, Proverbs says. It's not a bad thing to love a good reputation. But the order of my loves in that moment should have been God, Judah, my reputation. And it was reversed.

Anger is risky, because though it is motivated by love, our loves are so often out of whack. And when we get angry because our disordered loves are being threatened—we get bitter and people get hurt.

IV. **Anger has an antidote: The Gospel.**

So, anger is destructively powerful—thought it can be a good thing. But it's incredibly dangerous for us, and usually laden with temptation if not outright sinful. So, what do we do with it? How do we live with our anger wisely?

And Proverbs has one solution for us: *Become slow to anger*. We must become slow to anger. Now, Proverbs really has two tracks when it comes to dealing with anger:

1. **Be slow to express your anger. That is, when you become angry, learn to hold your tongue!**

17:27 - “Whoever restrains his words has knowledge, and he who has a cool spirit is a man of understanding.”

29:11 – “A fool gives full vent to his spirit, but a wise man quietly holds it back.”

That one hurts. Oh, how often have I justified to myself or somebody else: “I just need to vent for a minute.” And Proverbs says: That’s foolish.

And the reason for all of this is what we just talked about: You can’t trust your anger. You can’t trust it. In the initial moments of being angry, you can’t trust yourself. You can’t trust your knowledge, you can’t trust the control of your emotions, you can’t trust your love.

Listen to Proverbs 16:24-25 – **“Gracious words are like a honeycomb, sweetness to the soul and health to the body. There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death.”**

Now, I don’t think it’s a coincidence that these two verses are right next to each other. Because in the heat of anger, gracious words, gentleness, self-control—they don’t seem right to us! Anger seems right! Vengeance seems right! Something isn’t fair!

Look, the tricky thing about anger, it always seems right. Always. Very, very rarely are we furious and know that we’re out of line. Anger has a self-justifying nature to it. “Yeah, I’m angry, of course I’m angry, she keeps accusing me of such-and-such and *that’s not fair*. She has no idea what I go through every day.” “Yeah, I’m angry—because he’s a jerk! He can’t be allowed to treat people this way!” Or, “yeah, I’m angry, because people are getting hurt! They’re ruining our country! He’s ruining his life! They’re mutilating children!”

All of that very well may be true. Your anger is probably justified! But whether it is or not, either way, in the midst of your anger, what seems right is always going to be judgment. What seems right is pouring out wrath. What seems right is full vent of your spirit. And Proverbs says: “That’s foolish. The way that seems right to man leads to death—but gracious words bring life.” So, we must be slow to act in our anger, to express it.

And yet, we can’t stop there. Because to talk about “holding back” in our anger, to use phrases like “restrain our words” could give the impression that what you’re supposed to do is just stuff your emotion down. You’re just supposed to hold it in. What really matters is the external action, the lashing out. So, if I just stuff it down, I’m doing my Christian duty.

Oh, how dangerous that is, brothers and sisters. It’s so dangerous.

It’s dangerous for the hot head. Because the man who runs hot, who is constantly simmering, and constantly trying to stuff down those emotions just by sheer will power—it’s not going to last forever. At some point, anger is going to win the battle of the wills. And when the bomb goes off, it will be devastating. But it’s also dangerous to the rest of us.

Here's the thing: There is an anger that is loud and flashy and hot! It's like a bomb going off! And everybody knows it. And it impacts everybody. And it's dangerous.

And there is an anger that is subtle. And cold. And hidden. It is like the tasteless, scentless poison in the water that kills, slowly and subtly, but surely. Nobody else knows it—at least they wouldn't name it anger. But it impacts everyone. And it's deadly.

In Proverbs 26, it says you can have kind lips but a hateful heart. Listen to this:

Whoever hates disguises himself with his lips and harbors deceit in his heart; when he speaks graciously, believe him not... his hatred [is] covered with deception.”

There is a way to *hate*, to be angry—and for nobody to ever know. To put on nice smiles and kind words and to be utterly resentful underneath. And there are both kinds in this room.

There are people who are hotheads on Facebook, and they lash out at their enemies and *anybody* who would dare defend their enemies. They put up walls with their words and breed strife and disdain.

And there are people who sit, silently—and *hate* those hot-headed people. And they never have anything but a smile for them at church, they never speak poorly of them publicly. But they cringe at the sight of them. Just thinking about them causes a knot of stress and bitterness to form in their stomach. And when the suffering comes for the hot-head—probably because of their own doing—there is a part of them inside that says: “Good. I saw that coming. Serves them right.” And they smile.

There are men (and women) who berate their spouses or children in fury, making the home a living hell and everybody hates it—and there are men and women who stew silently for decades, their cold disdain poisoning every relationship and leading everyone into the trap of hateful indifference toward one another.

There are people who get furious with God and lash out at him and his people, shouting: “This is all bogus! You're all hypocrites! If there's a God, I don't like him!” And there are people who have a constant irritation with God, his ways, his people, but never admit it. And slowly, but surely, they drift away, poisoned by silent disdain. They may go to church all their life, but they never learn to love him. They never take joy in his law or delight in his people. They're just stuffing anger, annoyed that they have to go to all this religious trouble.

The danger of anger isn't only the danger of expressed anger. Anger, just as a feeling that never gets expressed, that just gets shoved down again and again—is lethal.

So, the solution to dealing with anger wisely is not merely to be slow to express our anger, it is **to be slow to get angry!** The issue is not merely a self-control issue. It's a heart issue. It's an issue of what our instinctual feelings and attitudes are.

This is what Proverbs is getting at with all these verses:

14:29- “Whoever is slow to anger has great understanding, but he who has a hasty temper exalts folly.

19:11 - “Good sense makes one slow to anger, and it is his glory to overlook an offense.”

To be slow to anger is to be a person who can see and feel the injustice of the world without being ruled by an angry spirit, but instead have a default mode of mercy, and patience, and love. You know that all over the Bible, God is described as “slow to anger.”

In Exodus 34, right after the whole Golden Calf incident, God appears to Moses. He “he shows him his glory”. It’s the most personal revelation of God to a singular person in all Scripture. **“The Lord descended in the cloud and stood with him there... and proclaimed, “The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children’s children, to the third and fourth generation.”**

Slow to anger. What God is describing in this moment is not a God who blows up at the slightest dishonor—if that was the case, the world would have been decimated eons ago. And what God is describing in that moment is not a God who is terminally furious with his people, but strains to contain his wrath, internally seething but projecting a false smile. No! When God says that he is slow to anger, he says that at the core of his being, his default mode, posture toward his sinful people who deserve his anger perpetually is not anger but mercy! Forgiveness! Love! That’s what he feels!

Now, God doesn’t feel emotions in the exact same way that we do—it’s part of what makes him God. So, take this with a grain of salt: God is not merely slow to express his anger, he is slow to feel it! He’s slow to sit in it, to indulge it. Because God’s anger is always an expression of his love—and his love is perfect. It’s deep, it’s vast.

And the only way that any of this makes sense, that a just God who loves deeply could be slow to anger, the only way he could show us how that works, is through the Gospel.

Don’t you see how Jesus is the solution to your anger, friend? The Father sent him to absorb anger! Us humans are so, so angry-so angry that when God came down to earth, we killed him. And on the cross, Christ took it. He just took it. He didn’t run from it. He didn’t hide. He just took it. Every poisonous word that has ever escaped your lips. Every vicious blow from an uncontrollable rage. Every scoff of silent, simmering hatred—he took it, there on the cross, and so much more.

Because he didn’t only take our unrighteous, selfish anger, he absorbed the righteous wrath of God, when we deserved it. Oh, how we deserved it. If God was not slow to anger we would have been decimated in seconds.

But in Christ, God absorbed his own anger. He took the judgment, in mercy and grace, so every human being who comes to Jesus, to trust in him as Savior and Lord, though they deserve the judgment of the anger of God, can be pronounced: Not guilty! There's no anger left for those who are in Christ Jesus!

If you're stuck in a cycle of anger today, you have to see this. If you are a Christian and you're perpetually angry—at yourself, at others, at God—then I'm just going to tell you, the gospel hasn't sunk into you deeply enough. It hasn't!

Some of you are perpetually angry because you're prideful. You have a bitter voice that pops up every time somebody disappoints you that says: "How can he do that? How can she really think that? It's just so stupid! It's so immature!" And you say: "Guilty! Deserving of judgment. Deserving of anger."

And you might be right! You probably are! But don't you recognize that without Jesus that is you! It's you.

And when you recognize that, when that truth sinks in deep into your bones; your reactionary feelings start to move from anger to pity—not condescending, snobby pity. Loving pity. Sympathy, that drives you to action. Grace. And that makes you the best kind of godly person to be around, the kind of person who people can be vulnerable with. The kind of person who can lead people to the Savior.

Now, there are also others of you in here, who are perpetually angry—not because you're prideful, but because you're afraid. You're afraid that justice won't be done. "If I just let this go, nobody will know! It's not right how he treats me, it's not right how she holds these unfair expectations of me. It's not right that bad men run the world, it's not right that those Christians do that thing. I have to be angry—or they get away with it! People should know! And even if I don't say anything, at least I should know!"

Brother or sister, those words may not have crossed your mind, but I have felt that feeling. And if you've felt that feeling, I just have to plead with you: Let it go. You—and your anger—are not the final gatekeepers of justice. God may call you to be a part of the way things are made right in this world—he may—but if you let it go, justice will still come.

Either God will get ahold of them, call them to repentance, and the justice was carried out on the cross—or the great judge of all the earth will call them to account on the final day. I heard one pastor say: "If you let it go, rest assured that God will pick it up."^[4] God will pick it up! No injustice goes unseen. Every wrong will be made right! Let the cross of Jesus assure you of God's steadfast commitment to justice. You don't have to bear the burden of holding that righteous anger forever.

Brothers and sisters, let us be a people who live in an angry world, yet are marked by gentleness and patience and self-control—people who are slow to anger, abounding in, delighting in, the steadfast love of the Lord.

[1]

<https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2019/06/26/735757156/poll-americans-say-were-angrier-than-a-generation-ago>.

[2] “The Healing of Anger,” sermon by Tim Keller.

[3] Becky Pippert, *Hope Has its Reasons*, p. 100-101.

[4] John Piper, “Do Not Avenge Yourself, But Give Place to Wrath” (February 20, 2005; Bethlehem Baptist Church)

<https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/do-not-avenge-yourselves-but-give-place-to-wrath>.