

Part 39: How to Unmask Anger

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This past week, some of the world's most trafficked websites and apps, like Facebook and Instagram, were down for a number of hours. I'd like to think that there was no greater stimulus package one could give our healing world than no Facebook for five hours. It was a digital timeout that most of us probably needed.

In those five hours perhaps the labor shortages we've experienced were filled. Maybe production in the workplaces spiked. And maybe, just maybe, we began to reveal a level of relief in our hearts that is often neglected.

Near the end of last week one former Facebook employee blew the whistle on all that she thought was suspect and deceitful in the tech-giant's operations. One of her claims was that Facebook's algorithms intentionally sows division knowing that communities of hostility and anger foster more usage than communities of diverse acceptance.

Social scientists are realizing that much of what the internet relies on is weaponizing, and even monetizing, our anger. It wants us to not just hot click, but hate click.

But I imagine that during those five hours this past Monday, anger was not eliminated from our world. There were harsh words spoken, abuse executed, hostility spewed, and demeaning comments made. Why? Because Facebook, Instagram, Fox News and CNN do not make us angry. They simply provoke the anger which we already foster in our hearts.

This is why we need the wisdom of Proverbs this morning, wisdom which address the anger which our world so desperately wants to on one hand criticize and on the other almost celebrate. Look once more at our key text this morning: **Proverbs 29:22-23**.

If you'll notice, the ESV translation fleshes out a Hebrew word here in a possessive sense. Solomon wants to warn us of a man given over to anger. That word implies a level of ownership, almost like that of a landowner. He wants to speak to those whose are given to, owned by, lorded over by anger.

Today, with the help of Proverbs, we want to see who that person might be, and to soberly consider if it might be us.

Now, it's true that anger is something that God himself has. God was not always angry, anger didn't disrupt the Triune fellowship of eternity past, anger began when sin began. God was angry at sin, and he is angry at sinners because sin is dangerous, harmful and catastrophic to those God loves. It is good for God to be angry.

Jesus in Mark 3 is angry with the legalism of the Pharisees. In Ephesians 4 Paul says, "be angry and do not sin." In other words there is good, sinless, righteous, God honoring anger. But most of us don't struggle with being too righteously angry.

I think this is an important preface to our text today because we tend to justify our anger sometimes by saying, "But there's good anger, Jesus was angry and didn't sin." But more often than not we say that in the same way someone says, "But there's such thing as good fats" while we shove our face full of french fries. Yes, good, righteous anger exists, and in fact good righteous anger is part of our hope in salvation. But on the whole we need to realize that anger is like our conscience, we have it, we will follow it, and therefore the question is not "am I angry," the question is "is my anger groomed by scripture and the gospel."

One of the primary things we will see in Proverbs is that just like our sexual life, our social life, and political life our emotional life must be placed under submission to God's truths, to be shaped and molded by his wisdom and not our own whims.

So what we are going to do today is examine a theology of anger as presented in the book of Proverbs. God's wisdom wants to do two things in our hearts today. First it wishes to diagnose our hearts, and then it wants to treat the disease of our hearts. This diagnosis is going to happen in two ways, first we are going to see **The Faces of Anger** and second we will see **The Fruit of Anger**. Having a clearer symptom of our own heart, then we will turn to treatment as we examine **The Fight of Anger**.

We want to begin today by looking at **The Faces of Anger**.

One medical doctor outlined the physiological response this way: "Respiration deepens; the heart beats more rapidly; the arterial pressure rises; the blood is shifted from the stomach and intestines to the heart, central nervous system, and the muscles; the processes of the alimentary canal cease; sugar is freed from the reserves in the liver; the spleen contracts and discharges its contents of concentrated corpuscles, and adrenalin is secreted."

While you, like me, might not know some of the words just used, we know the experience of this don't we. The experience is translated in the NIV translation of verse 22 as "the hot tempered person."

We know what the angry person is, but do who know who the angry person is? We know what it's like to have anger, but do we know if we are one who is given to anger?

I have never really considered myself to be an angry person, and then I got a dog.

Sarah and I often tell people in pre-marriage that marriage is a bomb of sanctification. However we say that marriage is like one of those Downy balls you throw in your dryer. It's got sharp edges and is meant to beat down the fabric, but it's also sweet smelling and made of a gentle plastic. Similarly, we say that when you have kids, the Downy ball changes into a full on meat mallet. It smacks your pride, slams your anger, and pierces your dignity. But having a dog is like walking out in front of a Mac Truck.

As I wrote this sermon this week, my beloved Bowser helped me see that I too am a man given over to anger. For many of us the source of our anger might be something which we are unaware of, until the moment it is provoked. But the wisdom of Proverbs shows God's goodness to us because it actually outlines for us these underlying causes and says, "Hey, this might be you."

Anger wears many masks of various faces, but God wants you to be able to see behind them. There are primarily four masks of anger that we see in wisdom literature. As a diagnostic tool I want us to stop and examine what they are in hopes that we might better understand the state of our own hearts.

First we see something which may be self-evident: **hatred**.

Look with me at **Proverbs 15:17-18** and also **Proverbs 26:24**. This might seem like an obvious connection and perhaps it is. But I think it's helpful for us to actually consider this. How many of us if we are honest have people that we dislike, and even hate, yet do not think ourselves to be an angry person by nature?

Isn't it easy to chalk up our hatred or severe dislike of a person to faults in them? But here it is connected to a fault in us. In the context of Proverbs 15 the good loving host of the Lord is being contrasted with the angry, loveless host of the world.

This might sound really silly, but I've experienced the ways in which disdain for someone added an unnecessary inflammation of my anger. There are some people in sports who I just don't like their face. I know absolutely nothing about them, but their face makes me mad. I realize how unfair that sounds, but let he who has no sin cast the first stone.

When I come to a position in my mind that I don't like that person, I by proxy do not like their team. When their team is playing, I am angry when they win. I'm angry when they do well. The sport which I turn to in order to enjoy is now sullied by the stupidity of anger.

Jesus himself connects hatred to anger when he says that whoever hates a man commits murder in his heart. Are you someone who has a penchant for holding grudges, making snap decisions, and writing off individuals? You might be one given to anger even if you think you're able to limit it to an internal like or dislike. To foster hatred towards one person might be a symptom of anger in your whole person.

The next face: **Envy and Jealousy**.

Look with me at **Proverbs 14:29-30** look also at **Proverbs 27:4**.

Hasty tempers are paralleled with envy which rots the bones, wrath and anger are connected with the devastating tide of jealousy.

What happens in your heart when someone you know gets the one thing you wanted? We might act like we are excited and happy for them but don't we know there are potentially three ways we can respond?

First, we can become angry at the individual because what makes them so special that they are able to get what I really wanted? That person hasn't had to work hard for anything their whole life? What makes her worthy of a husband, job or family like that when I can see her faults so clearly?

Or, we can become angry at ourselves. We can be frustrated and think, "Why am I such a failure? If only I had taken job 'X.' If only I hadn't blown that one date...Can I even get anything I want?"

Perhaps more commonly, we begin to hate what we have. We see someone get the new car or the new house, and all of a sudden we begin to see the faults in our own cars, our own houses. We see how well behaved so-and-so's kids are and we become increasingly frustrated with our own kids.

Are you one whose shopping cart and wish-list is always full? Are you one who wrestles with contentment and envy? You might be one given over to anger.

But now we turn to one of the more subtle masks of anger. The next one we actually step out of Proverbs for a moment and turn to Psalms for another helpful perspective. This is the mask of **Anxiety**.

Look with me at **Psalm 37:8**.

The context here of this Psalm is the righteous man being opposed by the wicked. The counsel of God is do not let your anger make you fret and do not let your fretting make you angry. It won't help!

I am by nature an anxious person and I realize that when I'm worried and anxious about something I find the most trivial interruptions of my thought process to be individual acts of aggression. I get frustrated as if to say, "Am I the only one who cares about this?"

It is the anxiety of life which causes us to hoard things of comfort, which we then fear the loss of, and protect them with our anger. In our anxiety, we become angry at the people or circumstances which cause our worry, and just as this Psalm anticipates, we think that if we get on our high horse of anger and destroy the source of our anxiety we will finally feel free.

But David says, "No! This sort of thought process only produces more evil!"

Behind our anxiety can be many things, weighty things, difficult things, but behind our anxiety is also the ravenous smile of an angry heart.

But the most insidious of all our masks in the book of Proverbs is perhaps the biggest Trojan horse of all: **Pride**.

Consider the parallel in our key text today: **Proverbs 29:22-23**. Or also examine **Proverbs 30:32-33**.

Have you been one exalting yourself? Then know that just as pressing milk produces curds, just as a punch to the nose produces blood, your pressing of anger will only produce strife. If anger is in the heart, it is often pride which makes up the armor.

Look at how Paul speaks of this in **Romans 12:3**. Paul wants us to fight for a sober and objective view of ourselves in light of God's great mercy to us in Jesus Christ.

Which means that pride is a fundamental perversion of how we ought to see our world. A prideful heart sees everything as out of place. It sets itself up for anger.

I know of a pastor who has a severe nerve disorder in his arms. The disorder is that whenever there is physical pressure on any part of his arms or hands, his nerves tell his brain that it is being hurt. That means that even a hug from one of his children carries the pain of hot needles on his skin.

Pride enflames the flesh of our souls in such a way that any pressure we experience in this world provokes our anger.

Prideful people expect things to get done as they see fit and when their rule isn't met, they are angry that they have been transgressed. They elevate themselves above others and expect that the world would serve them.

How many of us feel the sting of pride and the fire of anger when our roommates accidentally lock us out of the apartment? Or when our spouses forget to take the car seats out of the vehicles when they go to work? We think, "Do you know who I am? Did you dare inconvenience me? I've got things to do, important places to be, did you not consider what would happen if the world didn't have me today?"

One of the hardest hearts when it comes to soberly examining our anger is the heart of the prideful person. Why? Because the prideful person wants to be seen as the wise source of what is good, the powerful mover of things that get done, but to see our anger is to see a trail not of flourishing but of foolishness.

Look at **Proverbs 14:29**.

Prideful hearts cannot stand to see where our anger exalts our folly. It cuts us and harms us at the very point we wish to be most protected, but at the heart of our pride lay the source of our anger.

Before we get into the relief the Bible gives us, Proverbs isn't done showing us more diagnostics.

This is where we examine quickly **The Fruit of Anger**. What does this anger produce? Well what we can see in the passage we just read, is that it will produce shame. Shame either in this world, or shame at the coming of Jesus when the arrogant hardness of your heart is showing for the cosmic delusion it is.

But more than that we see that anger produces endless frustration. Look at **Proverbs 19:11**. A person given to anger cannot overlook anything. They have to correct what is wrong. They have to chastise for what was missed. They have to vindicate what was maimed.

This world is full of broken, imperfect, struggling sinners. To be given over to anger is to live our lives constantly frustrated at the endless pace of sin and brokenness. There is no peace for the angry person.

Anger produces constant strife between others and transgression against God. Again, look back at **Proverbs 29:22**.

An angry person never actually learns to live at peace with others, they often simply force people to live at peace with them. But behind that false peace is the façade of strife—always tension between people, walking on eggshells and tiptoeing around sacred cows.

But more than that, anger will produce not only strife between people, but at some point it will make you a transgressor. The legal world knows that anger causes many people to transgress the laws of society, but we know from a spiritual perspective it is anger which inevitably causes us to transgress the law of God.

Look at how James puts this in **James 1:19-20**.

Anger will not produce righteousness. It will never get you where you want to go. Which is why we want to look at the masks of our lives and see where our anger lies so that we might make a change. What is that change? This is where we bring our final point on treatment: **The Fight of Anger**.

James gives us two quick attacks we must make to frame this discussion. First he address what is external: put away filthiness and rampant wickedness. The second he addresses what is internal: receive with meekness the implanted word which is able to save your souls.

Are you an angry person? There is hope. Hope from outside. The last thing we want to hear after we have diagnosed our own anger is the command, "Don't be angry." That's unhelpful. But what is helpful is the promise that we are able to be saved. We are able to no longer be given over to anger, but instead given over to something else, someone else.

To experience such a salvation is to receive with meekness the implanted word of God. Pride is such a fuel for anger because it is meekness and humility not arrogant hearts which allow us to hear the word of our salvation.

What is that word? The gospel of Jesus Christ.

Look even at what is promised back in **Proverbs 19:11-12**. There is good sense to be had, there is wisdom from above. And what is it connected to? The favor of the king.

How are we to get a grip on the heart of our anger? We are to have the good sense of turning to the King who turned away God's anger against us. We first humble ourselves to see the ways in which we offended, insulted, frustrated, and failed the perfect God of all creation.

How do we fight against anger in our own hearts? We fight for a right perspective on what is truly angering.

We feel so slighted when people don't treat us as we deserve, and we respond with anger. But we are imperfect, broken people. Yet God is perfect, without flaw, worthy of only love, affection and worship but in cosmic rebellion we rejected him.

We became his enemies, we harmed his creation, we stole his glory, and we consume each other with wickedness. But while God was good and angry with us, he sent us Son to die for us as enemies.

Paul says in Romans 5 that God showed his love for us in this that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Nothing kills our pride more than seeing ourselves through the eyes of God. The gospel is infinitely humbling because it begins by acknowledging our faults and Jesus' work. Most of us struggle to even admit our faults, but more of us think that if we had enough time we could fix our faults with a little help from Jesus. But the gospel says you were impossibly broken and the only solution to your mess is the work of another. That is a message received only in meekness.

How do we fight against anger? First we look at what Jesus did to save us.

But secondly we see what the Holy Spirit has done to fill us. Look at **Galatians 5:19-24**.

Where at one point we were defined by our anger, not only has that desire been crucified, dead and buried with Jesus, but we have been made alive by the power of the Spirit for a new type of emotion.

Wouldn't it be great if this transition were binary? That at one point we had fits of anger, now all we have are fits of grace?

But that's not how things go is it? Jesus gives us freedom from sin here through the spirit, but the finality of sin only comes in glory.

Instead we learn to fight against anger by leaning into the Holy Spirit which is given to us by grace. I was talking with a woman the other day who is a new believer and I asked her what has changed the most and she mentioned her anger. It's not gone, but what has happened is she is able to take her anger and bring it to the Lord, to see it as he sees it and to repent of it both to God and to others.

This is the need Proverbs was anticipating when it said **Proverbs 14:29-30**.

Only the gospel gives us this kind of tranquil heart that can actually be slow to anger and life giving to others.

Seeing the word of the gospel slays our pride, comforts our anxious hearts, reminds us of the riches we have in Jesus and gives us a heart of love for others. Seeing the promise of the Holy Spirit grants us the pause and peace we need to avoid and repent from our anger.

But lastly, Proverbs provides a divine resource from less than divine sources. Look with me again at **Proverbs 15:18**.

How can we fight against anger? We can do the work of quieting contention in our own hearts, and in the hearts of others. We can help ourselves be slow to anger by leaning into the power of the Holy Spirit, and we can help others by quieting contention in their own hearts.

When it comes to quieting contention in our own hearts, I wonder how many of us willingly subject ourselves to places and things which seem to make us angry when instead we should walk away. I know guys who have stopped watching sports because they just get angry and it's an unhelpful provocation. I know people who have gotten off social media because the connection it brings to others is vastly outweighed by the anger it produces towards others.

But in the lives of others what does it look like to quiet contention? Most of the time the thing we want most in our anger is someone to share it with. That's what the media seeks to capitalize on. But what might it look like for us to be a community of people who come alongside others not to inflame their anger, but to help them see the issues as God sees it.

There are countless things in this world which provoke us, but a counter cultural community is a church which seeks to quiet what sin wishes to inflame. This takes wisdom and boldness, but this too is what the Holy Spirit births in us as it transforms our own hearts.

So let us this week find the frustration of anger in places we were perhaps unaware so that we can together find the riches of Jesus' mercy for imperfect hearts in ways we couldn't imagine.