

9-14-08: Letting Go of Anger: Releasing Resentment and Bitterness

Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor, for we are all members of one body. "In your anger do not sin": Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold. He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with his own hands, that he may have something to share with those in need.

Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.

Ephesians 4: 25-32

We've been talking about letting go of hurt with the idea of dealing properly with insult and rejection. Today we're looking at dealing with anger with a special focus on letting go of resentment and bitterness. This sounds easy and right but when we're ticked off at someone, we don't always want to give it up, it makes us look like the loser and it might leave our flank undefended against the next attack. So anger, unreleased, turns into simmering resentment and a nasty bitterness that we sometimes call "holding a grudge." If this grudge is bad enough, our demeanor and attitude change every time we think of the perpetrator — we usually have some nastier word for the one who's done us wrong.

Anger is usually the emotional response to some kind of violation — the sense that some body has offended us or intruded or cut across the grain of our expectations. Anger can also be a defense against hurt (when we're hurt or offended, it feels more like we're in control and less vulnerable than when we're just hurt).

I don't think anger is always wrong — not by a long shot. Anger is our system's way of telling us that something is wrong, or at least feels wrong. Anger is telling us that something or somebody needs to be different — to change. Hatred is our vile belief that somebody or something needs to be gone or dead, a very different dynamic. Sometimes there is a very righteous anger, a visceral desire to correct a wrong or an evil. More often, anger is selfish, self-justifying and self-righteous and it's looking for revenge. Anger is built deep into the fiber of our genetics — humans are a truly violent race, trained up over millennia to distrust strangers and to fight for what's ours. A central feature in human history is the record of battles and wars, the Peloponnesian, the Israelites against the Persians, the Thirty Years War, the Civil War, and on they rage. Anger propels human behavior.

Note here that the Apostle Paul doesn't tell us to never be angry, nor does Jesus. Paul tells us to deal with it and to do so that day. Don't go to bed angry — if you do, you'll wake up bitter. This is most important between people, if you think someone has hurt or violated you, deal with it. But make sure you get your story right. If you think some action is wrong or wicked, fight to correct it. If you let it stew, nothing will change except you'll be a cauldron of bitterness, poisoning yourself and others who don't deserve it and you'll slip into a pattern of

negativity and, possibly depression. You know how you feel about people who are always negative – you want to get away from them.

Paul also tells us something big: “in your anger, do not sin.” This is life-changing counsel, it’s Paul’s way of telling us that we can have our feelings but to deal with them and not to behave stupidly or destructively. The problem with anger is that it arms us to attack or counter-attack and the Bible is telling us not to do that: we’re called to a higher standard. Do we think about it? Yes. Do we do it? No! Our desire to retaliate out of anger almost always makes the situation worse. Look, brothers and sisters, God is calling us to be a community of redemption, not retaliation, a community of mercy, not vengeance. It is not posed to us as an option: Paul tells us not to sin, not to escalate, not to perpetuate the vile talk. Again, easy to say, hard to do. But it changes lives by changing minds and hearts and in doing so, we open the door to simple decency and necessary justice.

How do you do this? Well, I say this charitably but get over yourself! Stop thinking that your personal fiefdom is so sacred that you have to get even when someone tromps on it. Paul says “Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.” Yeah! Do that! If you can’t do that, go talk to someone, a friend, confidante, minister, counselor and get it out. Figure out if you need to go to some person and get it right. By that I mean, make sure you see it the way they did and clean up your perspective. Confront them respectfully if they’ve wronged you (we’ll talk about this more next week). But make sure the confrontation is designed to de-escalate the situation. If the other person is too volatile or reactive, do not do it alone.

But before you confront them or go to them, pave the path ahead of you with prayer. “Pray for your enemies – for those who’ve hurt you.” This is so darn tough because in praying for them, we’re giving up our own malice, commitment to get even.

Finally, if you have a temperament or history of anger, take a good look inside. What’s there that you haven’t dealt with? What are you getting out of being angry or defensive or reactive? Who hurt you and why are you holding on to it? Work on this because you need to purge yourself of this poison. As alluded to before, a lot of angry people are really very depressed – not sure which is the chicken and which is the egg but they need to address that and get past the depression. Do your self-work so that the rest of your life can be better, get rid of the anger, it’s (again) a toxin that poisons the angry person.

Believers in Christ are called on to be in a redemptive community. We’re called on to take the initiative, to be willing to break the malice by going to the other person with openness and forgiveness. Totally against human nature, we want to sit scowling and say we’ll talk to him or her when they come to us. Nope, believers reverse that – we’re called to be reconcilers. As that happens, as people learn that there are safe people and places, as they let their guard down, we become what the church was meant to be, a people full of acceptance based on standards of decency, a place of refuge, maybe an early introduction to heaven, a glimpse of the Master’s plan.