

The High Cost of Anger February 16,2014
First Presbyterian Church, Kissimmee, FL
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Matthew 5:21-26

21 “You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’

22 But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment;

and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire.

23 So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, 24 leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.

25 Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison.

26 Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

ANGER IN THE BIBLE

The Bible has a lot to say about anger. Care to guess how many times the word anger is mentioned in the Bible? The Bible uses the word anger or angry 337 times. And that’s not even counting the many other stories in the Bible that refer to conflict.

Looking at those stories about anger in the Bible I noticed that we could break them down into two types, stories about the anger of human beings and stories about the anger of the Lord. The anger of the Lord is justified. His anger is a burning fire that purifies and even brings salvation.

But, anger in the hands of human beings brings about disaster. Our anger is portrayed as unjustified and very destructive. Most of the stories in the Bible are about God repairing the damage done by our anger.

In fact, from one perspective, the cross of Christ is a symbol of just how destructive human anger can be. This is how far human beings are willing to take their anger.

The Son of God came to earth to save us. And what did we do? We crucified him.

ANGER IN THE WORLD

In case you haven't noticed we still live in a very angry world.

On a global level we see the terrible consequences of anger. For example, look at how many innocent children and civilians have been killed in Syria. Mistrust and anger passed down through many generations is a kind of perverse birthright.

But, of course we don't have to go to some foreign land to find examples of violence. Did you know that one in three women in our society have been a victim of violence at one time or another in their life?

When you listen to some talk radio shows these days, what stands out is not the information but the anger. Public discourse is becoming more and more confrontational. It's not enough to defeat your opponent. Now it is necessary to destroy your opponent.

We see horrible examples of murders occurring as a result of road rage. We hear about sports fans being killed because they dared to wear the jersey of an opposing team at the other team's stadium. Not long ago a former sheriff becomes so agitated at a man texting in a movie theater that he pulls out a gun and kills the offender.

The world is a very angry place indeed.

ANGER IN THE CHURCH

Isn't it nice that we're in the church where never is heard a discouraging, angry word. Oh wait, that's not true either. Unfortunately, anger is not exempt from church.

In fact when it comes to what we believe, we are often quite passionate. And that passion can lead to deep-seated anger. The worst part about anger in the church is that we think that our anger is justified because in our mind God is "on our side".

I would remind you once again that some of the people responsible for the crucifixion of Jesus were very religious people. Misguided faith can lead to the most dangerous anger of all. We act as if we alone know the gospel truth, and everyone else is just plain wrong.

It seems that many of us in the church have forgotten what the word "forbearance" means. Forbearance means among other things: tolerance, restraint, self-control and moderation. It's a wonderful word, and it's used in the Bible to describe how God relates to us.

God does not treat us, as we deserve to be treated. Instead, God shows forbearance toward us. God forgives us.

And in response to God's forbearance we are commanded to show forbearance toward others. We are to refrain from judging others because God has shown us mercy.

It's like we say every week in the Lord's Prayer. We forgive those who sin against us because God has forgiven our sins. (See Romans 2:1-4)

HELL!

But, if we do not live by grace, we will be in a world of hurt. The consequences of not showing forbearance toward others are great. In fact if we do not show forbearance toward others, we will find ourselves in hell!

Don't blame me. I didn't say that. That's what our lesson for today said. If you call someone a "fool" you are "liable to the hell of fire".

Now that seems like an awfully harsh punishment for calling someone a fool.

I mean all it takes is to have someone cut me off in traffic and “fool” would be the best thing I would say about that driver. And if we’re going to be judged for being angry, then I’m afraid we’re all sunk.

But, that’s not exactly what the passage says. The passage tells us if we are angry toward others we are “liable” for judgment. We are in danger of judgment. If we call someone a “fool” we are “liable” to “the hell of fire”. We are in danger of putting our selves in hell.

It’s like that old saying: “We’re playing with fire.” We are in danger of doing something that can make life a living hell for us.

In other words, anger has a consequence.

Sometimes anger can lead to murder. We see examples in the news every day. Anger leads people who have no criminal history to commit a terrible crime on the spur of the moment.

Jesus tells us that in order to avoid that murderous moment and making our life a living hell we have to deal with our anger in a different way. Murder begins with a murderous intention, anger in our heart. And that’s where we need to make a change, in our heart.

There are many practical reasons to deal with the anger in our heart. Jesus talks about some of those consequences. As we’ve said, anger can lead to the ultimate tragedy, murder.

Anger can also lead us to court, and guess what happens in court? Sometimes you lose your shirt in those court cases.

And worst of all anger keeps us from worshipping God. If we are really angry with someone we will find it difficult if not impossible to pray and sing God’s praise.

There are other consequences to anger that Jesus didn’t mention.

Anger can lead to divorce and broken relationships. It's been well documented that anger can lead to physical problems like high blood pressure and eventually a heart attack.

Anger can cause our emotions to go out of control. A psychiatrist once told me that depression is nothing more than anger turned inward.

ANGER DISARMED

But, some would object,

"Yes, I know I shouldn't be angry. But, I just can't help it. That's just who I am. That's my personality."

Is that true? Are we really at the mercy of our anger?

I think Jesus would disagree. The good news is that we don't have to be a captive to our anger. In fact anger is not nearly as powerful a force as we might think.

But, anger does have to be monitored and disarmed.

Several years ago the Reader's Digest ran an article about a married couple that were having a terrible fight after a party one night. They only stopped arguing long enough to lock the doors because they were going through a neighborhood that was not so nice.

But, once the doors were locked the argument escalated more and more as they drove along. Finally after a few choice words from the husband, the wife insisted, "Stop the car and let me out right now!"

The husband stopped the car. The wife unlocked the door, got out, looked around, and then promptly got back in the car.

Looking a bit sheepish she said, "Take me to a better neighborhood."

They both broke out in laughter. And the argument was over.

Now suppose that the neighborhood wasn't so bad. What would have happened if the wife got out of the car and walked home that night? What would have happened if laughter had not disarmed their anger?

The results could have been quite different, even tragic.

Jesus tells us to take the initiative when it comes to anger. Do something to diffuse that anger before it gets out of hand.

He gives us two examples of how we might do that.

If you're offering your gift to God at the altar and you "remember" that a brother or a sister has an "issue" with you, do something about it. Leave your gift at the altar and go try to work things out with the brother or sister with whom you have a problem.

That's interesting. Making amends with someone is even more important than worship.

And the second example is about two people who are going to court. Jesus said that they should try to work things out before they get to court. If you lose in court, you might lose everything. It's in everyone's interests to settle.

THE MINISTRY OF RECONCILIATION

A week ago I taught a class for Presbytery on the Confession of 1967. The whole confession is based upon one verse from the Bible, 2 Corinthians 5:19.

It reads, "in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us."

According to this passage the whole ministry of Christ can be summarized in one word, reconciliation. In Christ God was bringing peace and forgiveness and understanding to the world. And God has called us to preach that message.

This is the gospel.

God was in Christ bringing the hope of reconciliation to the world, and we are ambassadors for Christ. We have been commissioned to bring God's message of reconciliation to the world.

How do we do that? How do we bring peace to an angry world?

The apostle Paul wrote in his letter to the Ephesians, “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.”

Note that Paul acknowledges that we all get angry. The important point is how we deal with that anger. If we let the sun set on our anger, if we hang on to that resentment and do not seek reconciliation right away, we give the devil a foothold.

Unresolved anger creates a spiritual crisis. There is a sense of urgency.

When relationships are strained whether it's our fault or not Jesus tells us to go at once and seek to be reconciled. The sooner we are able to resolve our differences with other people the better the chance for reconciliation. The longer we wait the harder reconciliation becomes.

CHILDREN AND ANGER

Jesus once said that unless we become as little children we can't enter the kingdom of God. That can mean many things but perhaps one of the things that means is that we need to learn to forgive more quickly.

A noted psychologist saw some children arguing on the playground. One said, “You're stupid.” The other replied, “Well so are you.” Back and forth they went.

He walked on down the road and about ten minutes later came by the playground again. The children were playing together, having forgotten the whole incident.

There was no brooding, no wounded egos, and no blame. There was just a brief, honest exchange of angry feelings, an even briefer cooling off period, and all was forgiven.

The psychologist wrote, “Children are certainly more forgiving than adults. But, somewhere in the process of growing up we seem to have become experts at holding grudges.”

He's right. We have become experts at holding grudges. We learn to hold on to our anger. We need to unlearn that for our own spiritual, emotional and physical health. We need to learn how to let that anger go.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF ANGER

So today, Jesus has given us some practical strategies to help us do that.

First, Jesus tells us to think about the consequences of holding on to anger.

Murder and financial ruin begin when a person allows anger to linger too long in the heart. Consider how much destruction anger can cause (or has caused) in your life and use that as motivation to reduce the anger in your heart.

By the way in the modern world a great source of anger comes from the media. Limit your exposure to those news stories and commentators who make a living off of gee whiz journalism and the promotion of anger against others.

Instead, seek out people who have a gentle spirit and as the Bible puts it focus on the positive. Guard what you say and what you let into your life.

The apostle Paul put it this way in his letter to the Philippians:
“Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, what ever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.”
(Philippians 4:8)

There really is power in positive thinking.

Practice it.

Replace the anger in your life with something positive.

SETTLE DIFFERENCES SOONER

And second, Jesus tells us to settle our differences with others sooner rather than later. Anger has a way of growing over time. Don't give anger the

time it needs to fester and develop. Drop what you're doing and make amends when you can.

And if that's not possible (and sometimes it isn't because some people won't allow reconciliation to happen) know that God forgives you and that knowledge will help you let go of the anger in your heart.

We can forgive others for our own good. Maybe what Jesus said on the cross can help, "Father forgive them for they don't know what they are doing."

That is true about all of us. We don't know what we are doing.

If there's someone in your life that won't allow reconciliation to occur, make the words of Jesus your own, "Father, forgive them for they don't know what they are doing."

And then leave it at that. Let the anger go.

PLOWING THE FIELDS OF FORGIVENESS

There is a true story about two farmers in Canada. One day the dog of one farmer got loose and mauled to death the two-year-old child of his neighbor.

The devastated father cut off all relationship with his neighbor, and the two men lived in cold, defiant enmity for years.

Then one day a fire devastated the property of the dog-owning farmer, destroying his barn and all his equipment. He was unable to plow and plant, and so his future appeared doomed.

Except that the next morning he woke up and found all his fields plowed and ready for seed. Upon investigation, he discovered that his grieving neighbor had done this good deed.

Humbly the rescued farmer approached his neighbor and asked him if he had plowed his fields -- and, if so, why.

The answer was clear: The former enemy said, "Aye, I plowed your fields so that God can live."

Christian love is about more than affection and friendship. It is about forgiveness and reconciliation. It is about a law deeper than litigation. It is about the law of grace and the power of resurrection.

This day, if any of us feel far from God, it is not because God has moved away from us. It is because we have moved away from God.

Anger and brokenness and disappointment have a way of isolating us from the grace of God.

The answer to our problem is clear. We must plow the fields of forgiveness so that God can live in our lives again.

God help us to do just that.

Amen.