

Destroying Anger

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Preacher: Kirk van der Swaagh

[0 : 0 0] I don't know how it is with you here. I don't experience them here as I do in New York, which are queues or what we would call lines.

You know, New York's a busy place. There's a lot of people and you stand in lines. You stand in queues for a number of different things. And I was with one of my sons and we were down in an area to get some takeout food.

And so we were standing in line. It's just a little only takeout, like a hole in the wall that you bring the food out. And so we're standing in the line, standing in the queue. And this young kid comes in and jumps to the front of the line.

He jumps the queue. And he looks back at me and he goes, so what's going on?

What's wrong with that kid's action and that face? I could tell you I was angry. Would you have gotten angry? You ever have those conversations with yourself in those kinds of situations what you would say or do?

[0 : 5 9] You have fantasies about handling the situation. So what's at stake in a moment like that? It's justice. I mean, inside we're going, it's not fair.

Just wait at the back of the line like everybody else. And aren't you confronted with these things? I mean, all the time we're confronted with these things. Something jumping the queue is a slight that might be able to be overlooked, to be put somewhere.

But what if something deeper, even life-altering, you have a person who knowingly sells you a junk car, right? The friend at school who puts you down in front of a lot of other people.

That unscrupulous business partner or the unfaithfulness of a spouse. Such things provoke anger and do so justly.

See, we should be upset about injustice. Anger is the appropriate response to injustice. Our problem is, is that we are too sinful, too self-justifying, and our anger is either one legitimate but sinfully expressed or illegitimate because it really has no just basis.

[2 : 1 0] What does Psalm 4-4 say? Be angry and do not sin. Be angry and do not sin. The question is, is sinless anger possible?

That's why we're taking up the topic of anger here tonight. We're looking for help in managing this powerful emotion in a God-honoring way. Now, I've spoken at a couple of retreats.

I did one for a group of men from the denomination we're part of, and I spoke about this topic of anger. This was a number of years ago, and any time this comes up, usually there's some guy in the back who says, well, what about righteous anger?

And you know he's got a problem. He's got a problem with anger. The power of anger is that it has the power to destroy.

We're familiar with the Proverbs 15-1, right? A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger. A soft or a conciliatory answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.

[3 : 21] You know, in the Septuagint, the Greek translation, or the first century, excuse me, prior to Christ's death, translation of the Septuagint, there's actually a little phrase that's added to the front of that.

Anger destroys even the wise. Anger destroys even the wise. So a soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.

You know, there are just some angry people in the world. They're controlled by anger. And they're not fun to be around. Here's four Proverbs.

Make no friendship with a man given to anger, nor go with a wrathful man. As charcoal to hot embers and wood to fire, so is a quarrelsome man for kindling strife.

A man of wrath stirs up strife, and a man given to anger causes much transgression. And for as the churning of milk produces butter, and wringing the nose produces blood, so the forcing of wrath produces strife.

[4 : 25] Now, if you're someone like this, let me tell you, you are a pain in the neck. I know you think that no one else gets it, that you're the one that sees it.

The issue is that they do see it, they do see the injustice, but they manage the situation in a more godly way. And if you're an angry person, that is that, you know, you just think, you see the world with clear eyes, and you see it all, and you are angry.

You need to repent, we need to pay attention, and we need to get control of it, lest you fall into sin, right? What does the psalm say?

Be angry and do not sin. The anger is something you need to destroy before it destroys you. You need to destroy it before it destroys you, and destroys a lot of stuff around you at the same time.

So again, what is anger? What beliefs undergird an angry response? Well, again, justice is the issue. One person points out, as a general characterization, anger is a specific negative emotional attitude, a specific negative emotional attitude toward another person, another agent, which is considered to have inflicted harm upon us.

[5 : 48] And the beliefs that undergird that response is a belief that the objects of our anger, the person that we're angry at, has committed a blameworthy act.

Secondly, it poses a personal threat to something of value to us, a belief that that person's act had undesirable consequences for us, and a belief that the object deserves punishment.

Deserves punishment. See, that's where justice is the issue. But we have a three-fold problem. One, first, we are corrupted by sin.

We're corrupted by sin. Our faculties for assessing what is truly unjust and what ought to be done about it are weakened by sin. We are just not, you know, just a clean slate when it comes to these issues.

Our responses are always tinged with the corruption that is in us. Secondly, we're invested in the problem. That is, we're not so disinterested.

[6 : 52] We're not impartial judges to the situation. Theoretically, when you go into a court of law, when you bring suit against someone or you're looking for some sort of justice to be meted out by the court of law, the idea of going into that court of law is that you have an objective party, the judge, and hopefully the jury, are there listening to the evidence, weighing it out, and coming up with a decision.

But on our own, we're not impartial. It affects us directly. And thirdly, we're motivated by revenge. We are motivated by revenge.

We want to get back. You want to grab that kid from the front of the line, take him and put him back there and say, if you move again, that leads to an unloving response.

And how destructive can anger be? Well, we have two examples in what we read here today from Matthew 5 and Numbers 20. One we might say is an unsympathetic response we might have or an unsympathetic looking at what might happen.

And one I think we're somewhat more sympathetic with, the response. But let's look first at Matthew 5. It says, You have heard that it was said of those of old, you shall not murder. Whoever murders will be liable to judgment.

[8 : 09] But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to the judgment. So, if you're offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go.

First be reconciled to your brother and then come and offer your gift. Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you're going with him to court lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, the judge to the guard and put you in prison.

See, here we have kind of the difference between the letter of the law and the spirit of the law. What's the letter of the law? You shall not murder. But what is Jesus getting at? It's the spirit of the law, right? We're not to murder.

That's the letter of the law. But destructive thoughts, well, that's the spirit of the law. That's what is being judged. But the word of God teaches us that our actions flow from our thoughts and desires.

Right? A good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good and an evil person out of the evil treasure produces evil. For out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks. And we think about some of the ways our words express our sense of injustice and it points back to what's going on in our heart.

[9 : 24] See, God is concerned, as Calvin says, with our hearts as well as our hands. And so he's interested not just in our doing some evil, excuse me, not doing some evil act, but also is concerned with the evil that is in our heart that prompts the evil act.

See, it's not enough not to murder, not to commit adultery, not steal. We only fulfill God's expectation when our hearts are also pure. Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord he who has clean hands and the pure heart.

So the scene in that Matthew chapter 5, the scene seems to be what's in view is that one in which, the scene is one in which someone has decided that he is the offended party in a dispute, but in fact he is the offending party.

And that's demonstrated by the description, there remember that your brother has something against you. And also, come to terms quickly with your accuser while you're going with him to the court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge.

See, you've heard it said, Jesus says, that you shall not murder, but whoever murders will be liable to the judgment. But I say to you, everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to the judgment. Whoever insults his brother, whoever says you're a fool.

[10 : 38] See, all of these are responses of a heart that assumes that they are right in their evaluation of the other person. But what we go on to see in this situation is that he realizes at some point as he's offering a gift at the altar that this guy, the party that he is angry at actually has a charge against him.

It's he's the one who has offended. And so, he is supposed to go deal with that prior to bringing his gift to the altar. So, you can see, I think in this, if we look at it, how anger can make a fool out of somebody.

This guy is justifying his anger and he's taking this fellow all the way to the court in order to settle this thing. But Jesus says, if your heart's not right in this, if you're wrong, you're the one that's offended.

You think you're offended, but you're the offending party. And this guy's willing to go all the way to the court, stand before the court, make his case, and only to hear the judge say, you know what? Guard, take him out and put him in prison.

These are the angry fools of the world with whom we have little sympathy. Now, let's turn to the situation in Numbers 20, and you're familiar with this, where Moses now has been leading Israel for 40 years.

[12 : 00] He's been in there. He's been doing this even though, you know, it could have been just a matter of weeks, a matter of weeks when the spies go into the promised land. They come back with a report. Everybody believes the report of the 10, not of the 2.

And so God is saying, you know, this whole generation that didn't believe me, they're all going to die in the wilderness. And so, there's several times when they complain about the fact they don't have food, that they don't have water.

Well, here is one. This is the second time that we get a water incident. And the people are complaining, you know, why have you brought the assembly of the Lord into the wilderness that we should die here, both we and our cattle?

You know, there's no water to drink. You know, you've got to love these people. You've got to love Israel. They are just so human, aren't they? They are just so fallen. They're complaining about a lack of stuff.

And the reason they have a lack of stuff is because of their own lack of God, of faith in God, their own trust in God. They could have been in the promised land by now for the last 40 years, enjoying whatever the fruit and benefits of the God sets there.

[13 : 02] It's a land flowing with milk and honey. Instead, they're wandering around the wilderness. See, if they followed Moses in the first place, they would have been enjoying the fruit of their labors in the promised land.

We need to keep that in mind as this situation unfolds. So Moses and Aaron, they go from the presence of the assembly and they go to God and God meets them. And God says to them, take the staff, assemble the congregation, you and Aaron, your brother, tell the rock before their eyes to yield its water and you shall bring water out of the rock for them and give them drink to the congregation and their cattle.

Now, in the previous incident, if you're aware, what happened? God instructed Moses to strike the rock. This time he says to speak to the rock. And so, Moses took the staff from before the Lord, it says, and it says, he commanded him, see, this is going to be a demonstration of God's grace towards his people.

It's going to be a demonstration of God's grace towards his people. They've been complaining. They're complaining they don't have what they want to eat. They don't have water. They've been brought out into this, led by Moses. But God says, no, no, bring them before the rock.

I'll give them water. See, God intends it as an act of grace. Moses turns it into a judgment. See, Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly together before the rock and what does he say to them?

[14 : 26] Hear now, you rebels, shall we bring water for you out of this rock? And he lifted up his hand. He strikes the rock with his staff twice and sure enough, water came out abundantly and the congregation drank and their livestock.

But what does the Lord say to Moses and Aaron? Because you did not believe in me to uphold me as holy in the eyes of the people. Therefore, you shall not bring this assembly into the land that I have given him. Because he didn't just speak to the rock.

Because he struck the rock. But you see, the anger that Moses had perhaps building up in these people for years and years and years. I don't know.

It's easy to imagine every night he lies down but why am I still in this desert? We would have been in there if they had just listened. Just listen to Joshua and Caleb. We would be now in the promised land enjoying its benefits and here I am lying in this tent in the middle of the wilderness.

And finally, they complained just one too many times for Moses. And their complaint is an injustice. There's no two ways about it. And it's injustice towards Moses that they're complaining to him when clearly it's God who's been bringing them into here.

[15 : 39] I mean, there is a real injustice that transpired. But what happens? Moses responds as we often respond with a heart that's not yielded to the will of God.

Not with a heart that's filled with compassion and love but a heart that is angry. He is angry. And so, what God intended to be a holy assembly of gathering people before that that he might demonstrate that his covenant grace is for them.

His steadfast love is for them. He was going to show them that despite all their whining and complaining, he was going to give them what they need. And Moses turned it in to an event about him. An opportunity for him.

to finally give it to him. Anger got the best of Moses. He twisted an expression of grace into the angry self-justifying act by someone who sees himself as the victim.

But he was called to be a servant of Yahweh, not of himself. One commentator says, God's punishment of Moses emphasizes that there is no excuse for transgression the boundaries of divine principles and guidance.

[16 : 49] Even when we are confronted with people who fully and unequivocally deserve hell and everything that goes with it, we have no right to personally dish out to them even a fraction of what they deserve without God's authorization.

Did God authorize Moses to do that? Did God authorize Moses to just tell them just how annoying they are and how dishonoring of God they are and how complaining they are?

No, what he authorized them to do was to gather the assembly and speak to the rock. The commentator goes on, as God's servants, our job is to do what he says and let God be God.

It's easier said than done. It could be excruciating to exercise such restraint. It can be excruciating, can't it? When that injustice is done, what's your response?

What do you want to do? Don't you have those fantasies that this is on, oh, I'm going to sort this thing out. I'm going to sort this out. I'm going to show that guy. I'm going to take that kid, move him from the front of the line to the back of the line so he can learn and he's got to wait for his turn.

[17 : 57] So how destructive is anger? How destructive is anger? Well, it easily devolves into sin. It pushes us to stubborn, self-destructive choices and it can cost us a reward of all of our years of labor as it did for Moses.

all of our goodwill, all of our testimony built up over years, gone in a flash. Anger.

You have to destroy it before it destroys us. So is there such a thing as sinless anger? Is there such a thing as sinless anger?

Be angry and do not sin. Is there such a thing as righteous indignation, righteous anger? Two examples. We go to Moses. Moses is capable of this. Right?

As he's coming down from the mountain having received the commandments, he sees and hears what's going on and as soon as he came near the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, Moses' anger burned hot.

[18 : 58] He threw the tablets out of his hands and broke them at the foot of the mountain. He took the calf away that they had made, burned it with fire, ground it into powder, scattered it on the water and made the people of Israel drink it.

Righteous indignation. And then there's the times when Jesus is righteously upset. Right? He enters the synagogue. There was a man there with a withered hand and the religious leaders, they watched Jesus to see whether he would heal him on the Sabbath so they might accuse him.

And he said to the man with the withered hand, come here. And he said to them, is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill? But they were silent and he looked around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart and said to the man, stretch out your hand.

He stretched it out. His hand was restored. And what's the response of the Pharisees? They went out immediately, held counsel with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him. Now what's the nature of these two, which I suggest to you, are righteous expressions of anger, right?

Be angry and do not sin. Well they're both focused on unrighteousness and injustice that does not involve the individual who is expressing the anger. It doesn't involve them.

[20 : 16] In the first case, it's the spiritual adultery. In the second, it's human cruelty. It's the cruelty towards this man with the withered hand. It's the, it's the, just the, the, the un, un, comprehending nature of what they're doing with that golden calf as God has brought them back to give them his will, his law.

There is a place for anger, for righteous anger. But for the most part, our judgment is far too compromised to exit, to, to exercise it safely.

Particularly, particularly if the injustice directly involves us. So, how should we deal with provoking circumstances? I'm going to offer three, I think, biblical answers.

First, we let God deal with the need for justice. We let God deal with the need for justice. As someone said, there's no doubt a place for righteous indignation, but there is a subtle temptation to regard my anger as righteous indignation, and others' people's anger as sheer bad temper.

the heart should be unburdened of its animosity by the committal of the matter to God. The heart should be unburdened of its animosity by the committal of the matter to God.

[21 : 32] If retribution is called for, let God take care of it. His retribution will be just and free from self-regarding motives. What does Paul say in Romans 12?

Beloved, never avenge yourselves, believe it to the wrath of God, for it is written, vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord. We can trust that God is going to deal with all injustice.

He's going to deal with all injustice. He will even deal with that kid and his injustice in their hopes he will deal with it by drawing him to Christ, bringing him to a place of where he sees his actions will only cause grief to himself and to others.

We can pray that that will happen before that day, but if it is only on that day, all that people have done have gone against the will of God. God will deal with it. He will deal with it with true justice.

Secondly, instead of seeking vengeance, pray for the one who has offended. What does Jesus say? You've heard that it was said you shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy, but I say to you, love your enemies, pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven, for he makes the sun rise on the evil and on the good and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.

[22 : 44] I have found this personally, and I'll pass this on to you. I've found this personally to be very helpful, that if I can pray for that person, but I don't want to pray like God rained down fire upon them, right?

That's still of the same spirit, right? But what I want to pray for them is that God would show his love towards them and not only that, that I would pray for them, that whatever it is that they have done that has created this sense of injustice inside of me, rather than me responding, I'm going to pray for them, and I'm going to pray that they will be blessed beyond abundance of God.

So I had a situation where someone that I was working closely with, you know, challenged me on something, you know, complained that I wasn't being pastoral enough or something, and I knew the circumstances, I knew the situation, I knew what he was talking about, but I felt pretty confident that I was not really the situation that he said, but I know that I couldn't defend myself and so I prayed for him and how I prayed for him is that God, would you let this man, what I want him to be done, I want him to be just welcomed, I want him to be like an international speaker to Christians, that all of his books would print millions of copies, that I would study and learn from him of what he has to say, so, you know, there's a sense in which that I'm praying for that person, not that God's judgment would fall on them, but God's blessing would fall upon them, yeah, and I guess I could, in the latent, in the quiet little place of my dark heart, I could say, you know, God first humbles somebody before he lifts them up, but we pray for those who have caused us this disquiet, thirdly, look to the one who when he was reviled, did not revile back, that's what Peter says about Jesus,

Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example that you might follow in his steps, he committed no sin, neither was he, was deceit found in his mouth, when he was reviled, he did not revile in return, when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges rightly, Jesus is our greatest aid, imagine being subject to the greatest injustice that has ever been perpetrated within the history of humanity, yet he did not yield to anger, he did not fail, and that's why he is our champion, again, quoting someone else, our anger, all too easily revolves around ourselves, even when it seems to be about injustice, Jesus does not become angry at those who arrest him, his accusers, his judge, or those who execute him, even when those who stand against him are clearly wrong, he does not respond in anger, instead his actions and words are those of mercy, love, and forgiveness, an offense against his person does not arouse his anger, that's why he could say, you've heard it was said, you shall love your enemy and hate your enemy, you shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy, but I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, see we can turn to Jesus for his spirit to help us in those moments, help us to first to repent, to repent of that darkness in our heart that just wants vengeance, we can pray as we entrust ourselves to him who judges rightly that God will be our vindication, we can pray that we will be able to love our enemies as Jesus loved me,

Jesus loved you, right, who believe it or not was an enemy of Jesus, we were enemies of Jesus, the hymn that we sing, behold the man upon a cross, my sin upon his shoulders, ashamed I hear his mocking voice call out among the scoffers, it was my sin that held him there until it was accomplished, his dying breath has brought me life, I know that it is finished, why should I gain from his reward, I cannot give an answer, but this I know with all my heart, his wounds have paid my ransom, listen, if you are prone to anger, let me say it again, you are a grief, you are a sorrow, you cause fear, disquietude among the people that are around you, and the Bible calls us to be angry but not sin, but you're angry and you're sinning, see, we are to be angry and not sin, and that's why we need to destroy anger before it destroys us, and how can we go about doing it, well we can let

[27 : 31] God deal with the need for justice, we can let him deal with it, we can trust that he will indeed settle all accounts, and he will, and we can entrust it into his care, and what that does is that releases us, releases us to actually pray for the person who's causing this injustice, right, so instead of seeking revenge, we can pray for the person, and then we can look to the one who when we reviled did not revile back, and what does he say, I'm with you always, even to the end of the age, you know, we quote that in the passage of the great commission, that's what Jesus promises, but it isn't just in order that we might be faithful to go out and let others know about Jesus, no, he's with us always to the end of the age, he's with you in that moment when the first thing you want to do is lash out with your tongue, with your fists, with whatever you can get your hands on, but he's with you in that moment, and you can look to him and ask him for the grace to be like him, to be like him in that moment, to allow

God to take care of the situation because we are just not the right person to deal with it. you know, I jokingly said, you know, that when I spoke at a conference about this and there's always the guy who raises his hands and what about righteous indignation?

You know, I don't know, I hate to be his wife, I hate to be his kids, just, you know, what you want is someone who knows how to deal with their anger, who looks to Jesus for the grace that they need to deal with an injustice justly, to deal with an unrighteousness righteously, to deal with that reviling in a way that just his response is one of blessing, of love, of grace.

Anger is just too strong, too strong of an emotion to not deal seriously with it, to think about it, pray about it, and try to find some way of overcoming it. Because it, we're told, be angry and do not sin.

So when we are angry and we do sin, we need to repent, and we need to ask God for the grace. The grace.