

Anger

Series: *Taming the Monster Within*

Mar. 6, 2023

Prov. 14:29-30; 1 Cor. 13:5b, etc.

We're continuing our series called *Taming the Monster Within*. The series is about the Seven Deadly Sins, which are:

Pride, Envy, Anger, Sloth, Greed, Gluttony and Lust.

This list was compiled centuries ago by leading Christian thinkers and practitioners. While there are many other sins, the seven are widely recognized as particularly dangerous because they are the source sins from which all other sins tend to flow.

They are essentially perversions of our deepest and most significant human desires. Which is why, if we're being honest, none of us can say we that don't struggle with at least some, if not all, of the Seven Deadly Sins.

So during a year when our ministry theme is *Making Space for Joy and Flourishing*, we're making space during Lent for God to search our hearts and lives for signs of these seven sins, so that we might receive God's forgiveness where we need it, and gain by his grace and through his Spirit an increasing measure of deliverance and freedom from these monsters that lurk within.

Only then can we truly experience God's joy and flourishing in Christ, and share it with others.

Today, we're going to talk about the monster that has the worst temper of the seven—the sin of *anger*.

We begin with a working definition of anger. This comes from 13th century theologian Thomas Aquinas, who said that:

Anger is an emotional force that wells up within you when something blocks the way to a goal you desire.

Try to think of the last couple of times you got angry. What was it, or who was it, that was blocking the way to a goal you desired?

How many of you are brave enough to admit that the last time you got angry was on your way to church this morning?

Do you ever get the impression that the devil works overtime on Sunday mornings? It's just uncanny. Because even if it doesn't happen any other day of the week, Sunday is likely to be the morning when your kid, your spouse, the weather, or the slowpoke in the blue Hyundai on the road in front of you— or perhaps even all of those things put together—are conspiring to block your way from getting to church on time and with a worshipful attitude.

And when your way gets blocked, what tends to happen? This emotional force wells up within you—a force called anger—and quite often this emotional force will find some form of outward expression.

Maybe you're too shy to honk your horn long and loud at blue Hyundai guy, but nonetheless you declare to the other passengers in your car how profoundly wrong this motorist is for being so ridiculously slow— it's like he's out for a *Sunday drive* when today is... well... it's Sunday. *But still!*

Your anger may well become contagious to the other passengers in your car, because as your emotional force wells up, it blocks them from their goal of not wanting to hear you yell on the way church. So by the time you pull into the church parking lot, you're not only late, but you and anyone who came with you is irritable.

Of course by now, the worship service is well underway. The only seats left are in the front, and you get ushered before the whole congregation to your front row seat. In the process, your goals of keeping a low profile and avoiding public embarrassment are blocked.

You notice you're clenching your jaw in an effort to clamp down on the emotional force that continues to up within you. Just then, you hear the pastor say, "Today's sermon is about the deadly sin of anger." And you clench your jaw a little harder and say to yourself, "Oh, this day just keeps getting better."

So anger is an emotional force that wells up within us when something blocks the way to a goal we desire— whether it's a big goal, small goal, good goal, bad goal, or anything in between.

With that definition in mind, today we're going to look at a variety of scripture passages that will help us explore **anger from three angles**. Along the way, I'm going to piggyback on a rhyming phrase from Tim Keller, who speaks of *blow* anger, *no* anger and *slow* anger.

We'll start by considering:

1. The destructive power of "blow" anger.

It may be surprising for you to hear that from the Bible's point of view, anger isn't always a bad thing. We'll talk more about that later in the message. Still, most of what the Bible has to say about anger is negative.

That's because anger, more often than not, is like dynamite. We can call this kind of anger "blow" anger—as in "blowing up"—because it has explosive power. This kind of anger has the power to literally *dis-integrate* your life—to pull it apart—in a number of ways.

For starters, **anger is bad for your health**. Proverbs 14 says:

People with understanding control their anger; a hot temper shows great foolishness. A peaceful heart leads to a healthy body; jealousy is like cancer in the bones.¹

This proverb closely links anger with jealousy or envy, which Pastor Andrew talked about last Sunday. If I struggle with envy, it's almost certain that I also struggle with anger. When I'm envious, someone else has something that I want for myself, and I resent them for it—it makes me angry.

But what I want you to notice in our verse is the effect that all of this has on the body. If *a peaceful heart leads to a healthy body* then *anger-filled envy is like cancer in the bones*.

When anger lingers—when it becomes a habit—when we get good at anger—all kinds of medical research shows that it weakens the immune system, and leads to a variety of health problems from headaches to high blood pressure to heart disease.

But anger doesn't only harm the body—it also disintegrates community. **Anger harms relationships**. Proverbs 15 says:

A gentle answer deflects anger, but harsh words make tempers flare... A hot-tempered person starts fights.²

In most cases anger involves some kind of relational tension or conflict. And in our anger, we often use words like weapons—harsh words that make tempers flare, says the proverb, as anger begets more anger and leads to the further breakdown of relationships.

¹ Proverbs 14:29-30 (NLT)

² Proverbs 15:1, 18a (NLT)

Many of us can think of moments when “blow anger” got the better of us, and those are often among the moments in life we most regret. That’s because they are the moments when we tend to cause the most relational harm— quite often in our closest relationships.

There have been points in my own life when I’ve had to repent of and seek the forgiveness of God and others for such moments. Is God inviting you to repair any relationships in your life that have been hurt by your anger?

Furthermore, **anger blocks wisdom**—it gets in the way of your ability to make wise choices. Going back to the verse we looked at in Proverbs 14, it says:

People with understanding control their anger; a hot temper shows great foolishness.³

In the Bible, foolishness is the opposite of wisdom.

When you finally cool off after you’ve been angry, and look back on some of the things you thought, said and did in your anger, do you ever feel kind of foolish? I know I’ve felt that way before.

All too often, anger distorts our view of reality to the point that we think, say and do unwise, unhelpful and often even harmful things.

But not only is anger destructive to your health, relationships, and wisdom. The more anger becomes a habit in your life the more it takes a destructive toll on your will. **Habitual anger handcuffs your will.** Proverbs 19 says:

Hot-tempered people must pay the penalty. If you rescue them once, you will have to do it again.⁴

And again, and again and again. Tim Keller says that anger is like an addictive substance that leads you into denial. But the more you deny your anger, the angrier you become. When you refuse to take responsibility for your anger and the problems it causes, you just end up blaming other people for those problems, and so you add those people to the ever-growing list of people with whom you’re angry.

Listen to this letter, which was written in response to a newspaper therapist’s column:

³ See again Proverbs 14:29 (NLT)

⁴ Proverbs 19:19 (NLT)

Dear Therapist: You told the mother of a three year-old to let him kick the furniture in order to get the anger out of his system. Well, my younger brother used to kick the furniture when he got mad. He's 32 years old now. He's still kicking the furniture—what's left of it. But he's also kicking his wife, the kids, and anything else that gets in his way. Last week he kicked a television out of a second story window. The window was closed at the time.

This letter was quoted in a *Psychology Today* article which explains that 30 years ago or so, a lot of people thought it was healthy to vent your anger, to let it out. But now, more and more, we're seeing that Proverbs is right.

The more you *get* angry, the more you feel the need to *be* angry, and it becomes a vicious cycle until you no longer control your anger—it controls you. That's the destructive power of "blow" anger, which leaves in its path the wreckage of individual lives, marriages, families, societies and nations— and all too often, even churches.

Now because of its destructive power, you might think that anger is something you should avoid altogether. But—and this may surprise you— that's not the case. Let's move on to talk about:

2. The misguided expectation of "no" anger.

It's clear enough that *blow* anger is sin. But so is having *no* anger.

You might hear that and think, "What? Never getting angry is a sin? I thought good Christians aren't supposed to get angry!"

But in Ephesians, what does the Bible say? It says:

Be angry but do not sin.⁵

Because that's how *God* does anger. As followers of Jesus, we're supposed to reflect God's likeness, and **God's anger always flows from God's love.**

Many people would have a lot of trouble with that statement. You might wonder, "How could a God of love get angry?" Consider this: If God never got angry about this world's suffering and injustice, then could he rightly be called a God of love?

Indeed, in its pure and holy form, anger is a righteous response to something that threatens someone or something you love.

⁵ Ephesians 4:26 (NRSV)

When several ago Jan and I discovered that one of our children had suffered a very serious and harmful injustice, we didn't just say, "Oh well, whatever." We got angry— precisely because we love our child so much. Had we been *indifferent* about it, our love for our child could rightly be called into question.

Our anger motivated us to intense prayer, and to constructive, sacrificial action on behalf of our child. This included facing the people and the system that perpetrated the injustice, using every legitimate means at our disposal to call them to account. It was a very personal experience of what is often referred to as righteous anger.

Now, in my case and yours, even our righteous anger can go south in a hurry. It can so easily turn into destructive "blow" anger. But whenever the Bible speaks of *God's* anger, both his reasons for it and his response to it are always unfailingly rooted in his perfect love.

We see this in Jesus, who is the sinless, human face of God. Scripture tells us that there were a few times when Jesus got angry.

One example of this can be found in Mark's gospel, which speaks of how Jesus "looked around angrily" at the Pharisees for their resistance to his healing of a man with a deformed hand on the Sabbath.⁶

Why was Jesus angry at these religious leaders? It was because they valued their religious traditions more than they did the life and well-being of this man who was precious to God, and should have been to them as well.

A bit later when we prepare for the Lord's Supper, we'll look at another instance when Jesus got angry. But for now, we can note that the righteous anger we see in Jesus is always rooted in love. Justice, reconciliation, redemption and restoration are its objects. And his anger was always expressed in the most constructive and self-giving ways possible.

But if there can be a basic goodness to anger— a goodness that we see in Jesus—how is it that anger tends to go so wrong for most of us? To borrow the words of the ancient theologian Augustine, it all comes down to having disordered loves,

Your loves become disordered when you take good things— like your relationships, your sexuality, your career, your wealth, your image — and turn them into ultimate things. When you look to anything other than God to provide your ultimate sense of security, self-worth and significance, you have disordered loves, and when your loves are disordered, your emotions become disordered—especially your anger.

If something or someone blocks the way to feeding

⁶ See Mark 3:5

Why do I so often fail to be moved by my neighbour's profound pain, but get all bent out of shape when someone cuts me off when I'm driving? Why am I indifferent to the world's deep injustices, but find myself livid when I perceive that someone is snubbing or disrespecting me? The answer is disordered loves.

Is your experience of anger a holy passion, or a hellish habit? You'll have your answer when you look into your heart at the things that anger you most, and ask yourself, "What am I defending?" Because in your anger you'll defend the things your heart loves the most.

So far we've considered the destructive power of "blow" anger and the misguided expectation of "no" anger. Now, let's look at:

3. The biblical call to "slow" anger.

The Bible's ideal is not *blow* anger or *no* anger, but rather *slow* anger.

In the Bible's great love chapter— 1 Corinthians 13— the apostle Paul writes that in this fallen world, Christ-like love is *not easily angered*.⁷ In other words, the more you grow in Christ-like love, the more you're going to become a person who isn't readily provoked or irritated. You'll become someone who is not inclined to vent, leak or mask your anger, but will be able to control it instead.

The book of James puts it this way:

Understand this, my dear brothers and sisters: You must all be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to get angry.⁸

As followers of Jesus, we are to reflect God's likeness, and *slow* is the way God does anger.

Many people picture fire and brimstone—they think about "blow" anger when they think about God getting angry. This is a common misconception.

Professor Rebecca DeYoung describes how she has her theology students look up a long list of scripture passages about how God gets angry. They comb through verses in Exodus, Numbers, Nehemiah, Psalms, Jonah, and so on, and:

A recurrent theme quickly emerges. A single verse is repeated time and time again as if to pound the idea into the reader's heart. "The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love."⁹

⁷ 1 Corinthians 13:4a (NIV)

⁸ James 1:19 (NLT)

⁹ Rebecca DeYoung, *Glittering Vices: A New Look at the Seven Deadly Sins and Their Remedies*, p. 131. Biblical citation from Psalm 103:8.

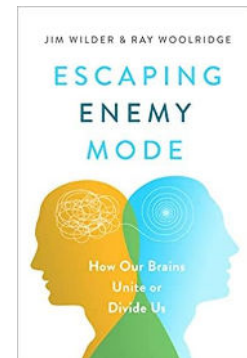
And so, we are called to do anger the way God does anger—not blow anger, or no anger, but *slow* anger. Biblically speaking, slow anger is what it means to do anger well.

And so I'd like to wind down the message now by sharing with you a handful of practical ways can make space for the Spirit of Jesus to shape you into someone who is becoming more like he is—someone who is slow to become angry.

The first practice is to **pray your anger**. To be angry well, you need to admit and own your anger. You have to be in touch with it. The safest and healthiest way of doing that is to pray your anger. Tell God about it in prayer. You're not going to take God by surprise, because he already knows how you're feeling. And I guarantee you, he can handle it. There are many passages in the Bible—particularly in the psalms— where God's people express their anger to God in prayer. Those passages are God's invitation to you and me to do the same.

The next practice is to **learn how to recognize and escape “enemy mode”** [Visual Worship note – pls include image of book on screen].

Dr. Jim Wilder is a Christian neuroscientist and theologian who explains what happens in our brains when we experience “blow” anger. A part of our brain called the right cingulate gets overstimulated—in a sense, it “overheats.” And when that happens, the relational circuits in our brain essentially shut down, and we go into what Wilder calls “enemy mode.”



When your brain slips into enemy mode, you become more or less incapacitated when it comes to doing relationships well. But what's hopeful is that you can learn to recognize when you're in enemy mode, and there are various practical steps you can take to reboot the relational circuitry of your brain—like going for a walk, doing deep breathing, taking some time to pray, or processing your feelings with someone you trust. While I don't have time now to go into detail about how it all works, I can recommend Dr. Wilder's book to you if you'd like to check it out. It's called *Escaping Enemy Mode*. You can find it on Amazon. I encourage you to check it out.

The next practice is to **listen more, speak less** (James 1:9). This comes straight from the text we read earlier in James. We'll be slower to become angry when we are quick to listen, and slow to speak.¹⁰

Is God is calling you to make a point of listening more, and speaking less this week?

If so, here's something you can try. When I was in training to become a spiritual director, one technique they taught us is called the “gap of silence.” Here's how it works: When you're listening to someone else speak, listen as intently as you can until they finish speaking. Once they finishing speaking, let there be a short “gap of silence” before you say

¹⁰ See again James 1:19.

anything. Just pause silently for a moment. This allows the person the chance to continue speaking if they have anything to add, which happens quite often. It's a simple technique that can train you to listen more, and speak less.

And when you do speak, endeavour to answer people gently, because it helps prevent the escalation of “blow” anger. Remember, Proverbs tells us that:

A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.¹¹

Another practice has to do not with the conversations you have with others, but the conversations you have internally, with yourself. **Keep your angry mental chatter in check.** Proverbs 24 says:

Don't testify against your neighbors without cause; don't lie about them.
And don't say, “Now I can pay them back for what they've done to me!”¹²

Who is this person talking to when he's saying, “Now I can pay them back for that they've done to me”? This is self-talk. It's angry mental chatter. This person is stewing internally about how he's been offended by his neighbours. He's going over and over it in his mind, to the point that he wants payback so badly that he's willing to give false testimony against his neighbours to get them in trouble.

But 1 Corinthians 13 says that love “keeps no record of wrongs.”¹³ It doesn't nurse resentments. When we fixate on how we've been wronged, our anger grows, taking on a life of its own, often become disproportionate to the original offense. Instead of this, Proverbs tells us that:

Sensible people control their temper;
they earn respect by overlooking wrongs.¹⁴

Maybe today God is calling you to take the list of petty grievances you have against someone—the list that you keep reviewing in your mind over and over again— and shred it, in a manner of speaking. Indeed, as a tangible exercise, you may even want to write out your list of petty grievances on paper, and in God's presence, literally put the list through a shredder. It can be a powerful and practical way to help you keep your angry mental chatter in check.

¹¹ Proverbs 15:1 (NIV)

¹² Proverbs 24:28-29 (NLT)

¹³ See 1 Corinthians 13:5

¹⁴ Proverbs 19:11 (NLT)

However, the source of our anger often goes much deeper than mere petty grievances. Some of us have been very seriously wronged or harmed. If you struggle with anger related to past traumas, deep wounds, and challenging forgiveness issues that you need to work through, it may be critical for you to **get professional counselling**.

[For a list of recommended counsellors see: <https://cornerstonechurch.ca/experience-jesus-care-healing/>]

Some of our anger issues are too profound and too complicated to work through alone. A skilled Christian counsellor can come alongside you, help you analyze and process your anger, and guide you in your journey toward healing and freedom in Christ.

Cornerstone partners with several excellent Christian counsellors who can help you work through your anger issues. You'll find a list of them on the webpage noted on the screen. Just scroll down the page until you get to the "one-on-one" section.

The Lord's Supper

With that, it's time to prepare our hearts for the Lord's Supper.

Chapter 11 of John's gospel says that "a deep anger welled up within [Jesus]" when his friend Lazarus died.¹⁵ The original Greek term conveys furious anger.

Who or what was Jesus so angry at? He was enraged at death itself, which had taken his friend, and caused such heartache in the lives of those who were mourning his loss.

So what does Jesus do in his holy anger? He calls Lazarus forth from the grave. This foreshadows the next and ultimate move Jesus would make in his love-driven rage against death. Only then, Jesus would be the man in the tomb, having taken the full fury of sin and death upon himself on the cross.

He experienced death himself in order to break death's hold on you and me. And he was raised to new life so that you and I can die to our sins—including our sins of anger— and be raised to live a new life in him—a life of joy and flourishing— both now and forever.

No greater love has ever been shown.

Through the cross, Jesus reconciles us to God, and he also reconciles us to each other.¹⁶ Indeed, the bread that we share in the Lord's Supper—the one loaf—is an emblem of the loving unity we share in Jesus as his church, and that we are continually called to live into—even and especially at those times when we get angry with each other.

¹⁵ See John 11:33, 38

¹⁶ See Ephesians 2:11-22

And on the night he was betrayed, Jesus took bread, broke it, and gave it to his friends, saying:

This is my body, broken for you.

In the same way, after the supper, he took a cup of wine, and said:

This is my blood shed for you, for the forgiveness of sins.

Every time you eat this bread and drink this cup, remember me...