

'Don't Go To Bed Angry - Stay Up and Fight'

Ephesians 4:25-5:2
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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For those people who question whether the Bible has any contemporary relevance for their lives today, I like to refer them to the New Testament book of Ephesians. It is filled with remarkably applicable guidelines about how to best live our lives. Today's passage from Ephesians 4, for instance, contains a very worthwhile list of common sense "do's and don'ts," and not in a fundamentalist sort of way, but in a practical living sort of way.

The list reads almost like the one by author Robert Fulghum in his best-selling 1986 book, *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*. He writes:

All I really need to know about how to live and what to do and how to be I learned in kindergarten. Wisdom was not at the top of the graduate-school mountain, but there in the sandpile at Sunday School. These are the things I learned:

- Share everything.
- Play fair.
- Don't hit people.
- Put things back where you found them.
- Clean up your own mess.
- Don't take things that aren't yours.
- Say you're sorry when you hurt somebody.
- Wash your hands before you eat.
- Live a balanced life – learn some and think some and draw and paint and sing and dance and play and work every day some.
- When you go out into the world, watch out for traffic, hold hands, and stick together.
- Be aware of wonder.

I find incredible wisdom in that list. Listen, now, for some of the similarities as I read the list that we find in today's Epistle lesson from **Ephesians 4**. In your pew Bible, you may have noticed that this passage is subtitled, "Rules for New Life."

- Tell the truth.
- It's okay to get angry - but get over it quickly.
- Don't steal.
- Work hard.

- Speak only words that build others up, not harmful, destructive language.
- Don't be bitter, resentful, or hold grudges.
- Don't quarrel.
- Don't slander, insult, or be spiteful and malicious toward others.
- Be kind and tenderhearted.
- Be forgiving.
- Imitate God.
- And live in love, as Christ loves you.

The "Do's" in this list are intended to help us lead a life of harmony and unity with one another. The "Don'ts" lead to disruption and possible disintegration of our relationships and fellowship as a family and community. And while these things apply to all areas of our lives, remember that **they were written specifically to apply to church life**, therefore to us as a congregation.

Since there's a complete sermon in each and every one of these Christian "do's and don'ts" I'm going to focus on just one this morning, because it is rarely addressed: anger.

In my study here at the church, I have a series of books on pastoral counseling. One entire 200-page volume is devoted to, **Counseling for Anger**. The editor, in the preface, makes an interesting observation. "No matter what people go to see a professional counselor about – relationship issues, interpersonal conflicts, depression, grief, whatever – sooner or later the issue of anger makes its appearance. In overt or subtle forms, anger tends to be woven into most counseling."

The author of the book, Dr. Mark Cosgrove, the chair of the Department of Psychology at Taylor University in Indiana, begins Chapter One with these statements:

- Anger may be the most common emotional experience that human beings share.
- To be human and doing anything is to be exposed to anger.
- Anger is common to everyone. More than any other element of people's lives, anger affects relationships and happiness.

The American Psychological Association (APA) has a very helpful pamphlet on the subject of anger that I found on the Internet (www.apa.org/topics/controlanger.html). I have made some copies and they are available in the narthex if you are interested in picking one up after the service. The pamphlet is entitled, **Controlling Anger – Before It Controls You**. It begins:

We all know what anger is, and we've all felt it: whether as a fleeting annoyance or as full-fledged rage. Anger is a completely normal, usually healthy, human emotion.

But when it gets out of control and turns destructive, it can lead to problems—problems at work, in your personal relationships, and in the overall quality of your life. And it can make you feel as though you're at the mercy of an unpredictable and powerful emotion.

As Christians, we often ask: **Is anger, in and of itself, wrong or even sinful?** Somewhere in the back of our minds we recall that the Roman Catholic Church names anger as one of the “seven deadly sins”. As part of this morning’s Old Testament reading, **Psalm 37:8 warns, “Refrain from anger, and forsake wrath. Do not fret - it leads only to evil.” Note however, that this passage doesn’t say that anger is wrong or sinful, but rather, anger may be a well-worn path to evil and sinful behavior.** The Bible often depicts anger as a dangerous emotion that, while not necessarily wrong, *can* lead us away from rational thinking and toward the damaging of relationships.

And no one – no matter how spiritual – is ever free from the emotion of anger. For let us not forget that the Gospels do not shy away from revealing that Jesus got angry from time to time – like when he overturned the tables of the moneychangers in the Temple. And especially in the Old Testament there are numerous references that ascribe the emotion of anger to God.

So it’s worth exploring the following question: **What causes anger? You may also want to reflect upon what, in particular, makes you angry.**

Anger can be caused by both external and internal events, and be directed at people or circumstances. Most of what makes us angry fits into one of the four following categories:

- **mistreatment** – including verbal and physical abuse;
- **unfairness** – including when we’re accused or blamed of something without justification;
- **disappointment** – including when things are done our way, or when expectations aren’t met; and
- **nuisances** - including annoying things that make us feel like we’re not in control.

Next, we need to ask: **How is anger typically expressed?** The instinctive, natural way to express anger is to respond aggressively – to act with aggression. Anger is a natural, adaptive response to threats; it inspires powerful and often aggressive feelings and behaviors that allow us to fight and defend ourselves when we are attacked.

A certain amount of instinctual anger, therefore, has been necessary to our very survival as a species. On the other hand, we can’t physically or even verbally lash out at every person or object that irritates or annoys us. Laws, social norms, common sense, and our faith beliefs place limits on how far our anger should take us. So, we use a variety of both conscious and unconscious processes to deal with our angry feelings.

The three main approaches to anger, other than outright aggression, are (to use the terminology of the American Psychological Association): **expressing, suppressing, and calming.**

First. **Expressing** your angry feelings in an assertive—not aggressive—manner is considered the healthiest way to express anger. To do this, you have to learn how to make clear what your needs and expectations are, and how to get them met, without hurting others. Being assertive doesn’t mean being pushy or demanding, however. Instead, it involves being respectful of yourself and others.

Second. Anger can be **suppressed**, and then converted or redirected. This happens when you hold in your anger, stop thinking about it, and focus on something positive. The aim is to inhibit, stuff, or suppress your anger and convert it into more constructive thoughts and behaviors.

Most of us, I would suspect, have been taught that this particular method is the most appropriate 'Christian' response. That being the case, I want to address this in more detail.

The danger in this type of response is that if it isn't allowed outward expression, your anger can turn inward—on yourself. This is often called "internalized anger."

Anger that is turned inward is known by health professionals as a possible contributor to certain health problems, such as hypertension, high blood pressure, or perhaps most commonly, depression. Now, other medical causes, including chemical imbalances, also lead to these health problems. Therefore, medication may be necessary. But we must not neglect the psychological component.

Unexpressed anger can create other problems as well, like **passive-aggressive behavior**. That's the process of getting back at people *indirectly*, without telling them why, or sometimes even if, you are angry. Many people are so afraid of direct conflict that they hardly ever address the person they are angry with head-on. Instead, they often complain to others. This is called **triangulation** – but that's another topic altogether.

Suppressing anger can also lead to a personality trait that seems perpetually cynical, negative and even hostile. **Experts believe that people who are constantly putting others down, criticizing everything, complaining, and making cynical comments haven't learned how to express their anger constructively.** Not surprisingly, they are often the people who have more than the usual amount of difficulties in relationships.

Another common reaction to keeping in anger suppressed too long is that it can find its way to the surface aggressively in the form of **rage**, like an explosive volcano that spews out molten lava on anyone nearby. Perhaps you've had someone come to you after something like this has happened with the comment, "Sorry I blew up."

And the third response to anger, after expressing and suppressing, is to try to calm down inside. This means not just controlling your outward behavior, but also controlling your internal responses, taking steps to lower your heart rate, calm yourself down, and let the feelings subside. This is where the wisdom of 'count-to-ten' comes in. It means neither storming out of a room in a huff, nor ignoring your anger. One psychologist notes, "When none of these three techniques work, that's when someone—or something—is going to get hurt."

Turning back, now, to wisdom found in scripture, the **Apostle Paul**, in his letter to the Ephesian church, writes, "**Be angry, but do not sin.**" In other words, anger is recognized simply as an emotional feeling – nothing more, nothing less. But coupled with that is the warning to not let your anger become mixed with hurtful or destructive behavior.

This is followed by the advice to not let the sun go down on our anger. This calls us to **deal with our anger in a timely manner**, even if it takes a few days or so to let our emotions calm down to the point where we can rationally and calmly address the situation.

In case you are wondering, today's sermon title comes from a line accredited to comedian Phyllis Diller, "Don't go to bed angry, stay up and fight." This is a humorous, tongue-in-cheek way to say that if you're angry, deal it with as soon as possible. The point isn't that "sleeping on it" is a bad idea, because a little time and space are often very helpful. It's just that it's important to deal with our anger in a timely manner.

In dealing with anger, that American Psychological Association pamphlet offers some **strategies to keep our anger at bay**. Without going into any detail, because we

obviously don't have time this morning, it mentions: **relaxation, cognitive restructuring, problem solving, better communication, using humor, changing your environment, and easing up on yourself.**

Let me leave it at that this morning, and simply share the closing paragraph from that pamphlet. And in case I haven't said it overtly enough, I think you can see that there is indeed an important connection between psychology and theology.

Remember, you can't eliminate anger—and it wouldn't be a good idea if you could. In spite of all your efforts, things will happen that will cause you anger; and sometimes it will be justifiable anger.

Life will be filled with frustration, pain, loss, and the unpredictable actions of others. You can't change that; but you can change the way you let such events affect you.

Controlling your angry responses can keep them from making you even more unhappy in the long run.

And I will close with this remark. **No congregation is free from situations that lead to people becoming angry at each other.** That's just a part of what living together as community of faith is all about. Yet, let us remember to deal with our anger constructively – **don't let it get to the point of rage, or more likely, don't repress it to the point of bitterness, resentment and negativity.**

With God's help, let us all work through our anger in a timely fashion and be reconciled to one another.

Amen.

Resources:

Controlling Anger – Before It Controls You, American Psychological Association
 Mark P. Cosgrove, Ph.D., *Counseling for Anger*. Volume 16 of *Resources For Christian Counseling*, Gary R. Collins, Ph.D., General Editor. Word Publishing, 1988.