

A Mess Worth Making
“What to Do with Anger”

Kevin Haah
Matthew 5:21-22



November 16, 2014

[Slide 1] We are in the middle of a sermon series called, **A Mess Worth Making**. It is a series on relationship and the mess/the conflicts in the relationship.

[Slide 2] Today’s sermon is entitled, **What to Do with Anger**.

I preached on this subject about a year ago during our Proverbs series. But, we have to talk about it again because knowing what to do with anger is so important to every relationship. It’s absolutely imperative that we get this right. There’s some new things in this sermon as well.

I share this message with you as not as someone who has it all together but as someone who God is working on. About a year ago, I learned something about anger that dramatically changed my life. What I learned changed the way I look at anger and the way I deal with anger in my life. It was pretty dramatic. I am not completely free from anger in my life but it has made a dramatic difference. I’ll tell you about what I learned a little later.

I believe that if you get what I am about to share with you deep into your heart, you will go a long way dealing with anger in your life.

Let me start with the neuroscience of anger. **[Slide 3]** I’ve asked our very own Dr. Virginia Chavarria who is a doctor of neuropsychology to explain the brain science of anger. As you may know, Manny, the leader of our recovery ministry, is her husband and they are a part of our church. Would you welcome Virginia to the stage?

[Interview Virginia]

- What happens in our brain when we get angry?
- In light of this, what would you suggest in terms of how we can better manage anger?

So, here is the bottom line, when we are angry, we are not rational. We are defensive. Our body goes into fight and flight mode. Chemicals tell our cerebral cortex, the thinking part of the brain, to stay out and chemicals are sent to our muscles, heart, legs, fist, to fight or run. When we stay in this state, we say things that are destructive, selfish, inconsiderate. We yell. We hurt people verbally or physically. We can destroy people. We are meant to use all of our brain in our relationships. Love takes all of our

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brain. Amygdala is meant to save us from big monsters. But, when we feel threatened, our amygdala takes over, and makes us into a destructive weapon.

This is not just brain science. That's what Bible tells us as well.

Now, what do we do with anger? How do we deal with the reality of anger in our lives?

Let's try to see what the Bible tells us about anger first. I think there is a huge misunderstanding about anger.

I. [Slide 4] What does the Bible say about anger?

Here is what Jesus said about anger in [Slide 5] Matthew 5:21-22:

²¹ “You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ ²² But I tell you that anyone who is *angry* with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, ‘Raca,’ is answerable to the court. And anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell.

Jesus clearly said that anger is a serious sin. There are numerous Proverbs on the follies of anger. [Slide 6] Here is one in Proverbs 29:22:

²² An angry person stirs up conflict,
and a hot-tempered person commits many sins.

There is no Proverb that is positive on human anger. [Slide 7] James 1:19-20 says:

¹⁹ My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, ²⁰ because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires.

Look, human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires! We sometimes think that if we are indignant and angry at someone, yell at them, or show disapproval via anger or even rage, it will produce righteousness. Maybe if I yell at them enough, it will change them. Maybe if I dominate and become an alpha male, things will be in control. But, anger does not produce righteousness God desires. It does not help the situation. I don't know why we think that getting angry helps. It does not. And it never brings out

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the best of us when we are angry. We always say things we should not say. We always hurt people. And sometimes, we lose our control completely, and things escalate.

If anger is the way to righteousness whether it is for ourselves or for others we are angry at, that would mean that the Kingdom way to change people would be by dominating them, by the power-over them, controlling them, and forcing them. But, it is not the kingdom way. The Kingdom of God is about the power-under, the power of radical submission, the power of gentleness and love. That is the power that we are called to live by. If we don't do that, in the process of trying to accomplish whatever holy and righteous thing that God has called us to accomplish, we are not becoming the kind of disciple God is calling us to be. We are becoming that angry, judgmental, holier-than-thou guy.

The Bible is filled with passages warning us about human anger. It tells us repeatedly to turn away from anger and seek gentleness. The opposite of anger is gentleness. In the original language, the word for gentleness is the same word as the word for meekness. To be meek does not mean to be weak. It means to harness power under control. Jesus said, blessed are the meek. Blessed are the gentle. He didn't say, blessed are the angry alpha types.

The call to gentleness is all over the NT.

[Slide 8] Ephesians 4:2:

Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.

Philippians 4:5:

Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near.

Colossians 3:12:

Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.

It's pretty clear.

Let's take it one layer deeper. I looked through every single text in the Bible that uses the word anger or wrath. In the NT, the standard word for anger and wrath is "orge" and when it is applied to God, it uses the word wrath, and when it is applied to human, it

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uses the word anger. Human anger is never encouraged in the Bible!! I have *not* been able to find *one* passage that encourages or condones human anger. There are plenty of passages that talk about God’s anger and wrath. Jesus even got angry at one point in the temple and cleared the temple. And as I look through the Bible, I came to realize that God is the only one qualified to judge. We are not judges. God is the judge. When we embrace anger, we embrace the role of God. Just because God is angry does not mean we are given permission to be angry. God’s anger is holy and led him to the cross for us, but our anger leads to destruction. *Nonetheless, the church has created a culture of tolerance of anger, even though we are called to get rid of it. How dysfunctional is it when we think anger is a form of holiness over people who sin? We call it righteous anger, but the Bible calls it sin. When Paul lists sins, he includes anger. We celebrate something that is sinful.*

This was a very dramatic realization for me. I knew getting angry for no good reason was bad. But, I thought righteous anger was a good thing. If someone does something wrong against us, I thought we were called to a righteous anger against that person.

But, the more I thought about it, the more I realized that anger always starts from some sort of perceived injustice or wrong. No body gets angry for no reason. We all feel like we are justified in our anger. “Someone disrespected me. Someone treated me unfairly. Or it could be that someone treated someone we care for in an unfair way.” And we feel somewhat righteous in our anger. That’s why we don’t back down. It’s sort of like standing up for justice. [Monkey Justice Illustration] But, did you know that even monkeys get angry when they are treated worse than someone next to them? I am not sure if they are processing as injustice but they definitely don’t like getting treated worse than another monkey. In this one experiment regarding anger, they had two monkeys right next to each other in two different cages. When they did something, each was given a piece of cucumber, and they were perfectly satisfied. They did this 25 times in a row. But, when one was given a cucumber and the monkey next to it was given grapes (which are considered a better treat), the monkey that got the cucumber got angry and started to

A Mess Worth Making
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November 16, 2014

throw the cucumber at the trainer. This sense of justice that drives us to anger is not some high humanity thing. It's a basic animal sense. It comes from the primal part of our brain.

The point is this: When we justify our anger based on our sense of fairness and justice, we pretty much justify all anger. **And when we do that, we are making an exception that swallows the rule. We are effectively legitimizing all anger by legitimizing righteous anger.**

Here is the problem. The Bible uniformly calls us to turn away from anger and it does not make any exception for justified anger or righteous anger.

Ok. I know some of you are thinking, isn't there a passage that says in your anger, do not sin? Doesn't that imply that anger is not sin? That comes from **[Slide 9]** Ephesians 4: 26. It does say, **“In your anger do not sin.”** You say, ha! It says that we can be angry. This is the only passage that can possibly be translated as condoning a certain kind of human anger. But, we can't stop here. We have to read on to get a sense of his full thought. He continues and says (Ephesians 4:26-27): **Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold.** What is Paul's counsel about anger? Get rid of it as fast as you can. Don't hold on to it. Don't let the sun go down on your anger. You are giving a place for Satan to work if you don't get rid of it. Could that be more clear? But we have made this passage a license for anger.

I don't think the initial anger is sin. It might be your sense of justice, morality, goodness feeling slammed. But, it is a temptation to sin. If you don't control it and let it go, you are giving the devil a foothold. That's what that passage says. It can lead to sin. As we read, Proverbs 29:22 says: **a hot-tempered person commits many sins.** Anger may arise out of natural response to something unfair but God calls us to a supernatural response. Maybe anger can be compared to lust. Jesus said anyone who looks at a woman lustfully have committed adultery. The initial look is not sin. She might be beautiful. But, to look at her lustfully means to allow the look to turn into something ugly by allowing yourself to fantasize about her.

A Mess Worth Making
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But, the bottom line is clear: when you feel yourself getting angry, get rid of it as soon as possible. **Human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires.**

II. [Slide 10] So, how do we get rid of anger, then?

Let me give some suggestions.

1. [Slide 11] Take a Break.

Before anything else, we have to allow the chemicals in the brain that turned off the cerebral cortex to be flushed out of our system. That apparently takes about 20 minutes. But, in my experience, that takes longer for some people. Most of us take at least that much time. We have to respect the physiology of our brain. If you feel angry, walk away from the conversation. Now, I know when you are married, it is difficult to walk away from the conversation. So, you should talk to your spouse about a time-out rule. Agree upon a rule where either one of you can take a break from the conversation without the other person following you saying things like, don't walk away from me! But, agree to come back and talk later at after an agreed upon period of rest.

So, take a break; walk away; and take several deep breath.

2. [Slide 12] Stop justifying your anger.

The reason that I went through the biblical teaching on this so comprehensively is so that you and I can renew our mind and stop justifying anger. **[Slide 13] Romans 12:2 says: 2 Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.** Our minds have to be renewed. We can't conform to the pattern of this world. So, no more excuse for our anger. No more justifying our anger. Whenever we have it, we must seek to get rid of it. We don't hold on to it. We see it for what it is—a way for devil to get a foothold in our lives.

It doesn't matter that our parents were yellors and got angry and that's way it was. We need to renew our mind about the way we think about anger all together. The Kingdom is about serving. It's about power under. It's about gentleness. Blessed are the

A Mess Worth Making
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November 16, 2014

mee. So, we need to identify generational tendencies so that we do not deal with our relationships the way our parents did.

3. [Slide 14] Examine your heart for the sin beneath the sin.

As you calm down, ask yourself why you got so angry. Now, there might be some good reasons, but ask yourself why you can't deal with this calmly. Often, we have a tendency to get angry when someone touches a sensitive part of our life, and often, that sensitive part has to do with past hurts or sometimes, something that we consider so important that when someone questions, we are easily angered.

When I evaluate anger in my life, I realize that it is often a symptom of a deeper sin. We need to examine our hearts and see the sin beneath the sin. If we have a tendency to blow up, we have to examine why we do that. Often times, instead of getting our life from God as a child of God based on his grace, we are trying to get life from something else. For example, if we are trying to get life from approval and respect, when people don't respect us, we start getting angry very quickly. But, if you don't get life from other people's respect and approval, you are not going to react with anger. Listen to yourself when you are angry. Do you use words like, no one treats me like this. For many of us, respect is huge. If we don't get respect, we fly off the handle. That shows that we are building our life on other people's respect. The point here is that anger is often caused by someone trying to mess with our idol.

4. [Slide 15] Repent of your anger.

About a year ago, our eldest daughter Kaetlyn started Junior High. I want to let you know that she gave me permission to tell you this story. When she went into 7th grade, it seemed to Grace and me that some sort of switch just went off in her, and it seemed like she stopped listening to us and started to rebel against us. She didn't want to obey the rules of the house. She felt that they were unfair. And she showed it. The more she rebelled, the frustration gave way to anger. Of course, she was frustrated and got angry too. We felt like our house was suddenly turned into a battlefield. Grace and I

A Mess Worth Making
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November 16, 2014

were angry at her and we felt justified in our anger. In the middle of all that, I was preparing a sermon on anger for the Proverb series. And that's when I realized that there was no justification for anger. There is no positive passage on human anger. There is no such a thing as righteous anger. I shared what I found with Grace, and we just started to cry. We felt that God was calling us repent of our anger against her. We repented in tears. Once we stopped justifying our anger, we stopped being angry with her. And she completely changed her attitude toward us. It was almost like she suddenly snapped out of the rebellion. Kaetlyn and Grace and I have a great relationship since then. I always thought she was the problem. But, it turns out that Grace and I were a big part of the problem, and when we stopped getting angry, we went a long way in solving the problem.

5. [Slide 16] Let love, not anger, be our motivation to action.

Some people ask if you get rid of anger, what would motivate me to do something about the wrong? Before I answer this question, just think about the question. Our culture has so brainwashed us to think that the only way to get things done is the alpha male and female power-over style that we wonder if we can be motivated to change injustice if we are not angry. How about another motivator? How about love? Love can be our motivation. “For God so loved the world . . .” What motivated Jesus? Love. It is not anger that motivated God. His righteous wrath grieved him.

6. [Slide 17] Transmute anger into godly sorrow, grief, mourning.

I know it is difficult to stop our anger. We can't help but to be angry at someone who has wronged us. But, what if we prayed to God to transform our anger into sorrow. Sorrow is a response that the NT encourages. Mourn with those who mourn. Grieve with those who grieve. Have empathy for even though who perpetuated evil against you. Learn to see them in 3D. When we are angry, we can't help but to make them into a 1D person who is evil and deserved condemnation and wrath. That's why we are not

A Mess Worth Making
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November 16, 2014

qualified to display righteous anger. God looks the whole person in 3D. He sees the whole picture. Our response is to transmute our anger into sorrow, grief and mourning.

7. [Slide 18] Pray your anger to God.

Be raw with him. Be honest to him. Ask about what is going on. Why? The Bible is full of people who asked God and complained to God in anger. That is one way we live in the Spirit, in this honest and raw relationship with God. Living in his presence every moment of our lives and wrestling with God. When we do this, the Spirit produces the fruit of the Spirit in our lives [Slide 19] (Galatians 5:22): *the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.* We don't produce the acts of the flesh, which includes anger. Anger does not fit into the life of the Spirit.

8. [Slide 20] Let the Gospel free you from anger.

The world is pretty messed up. The people of the world are pretty messed up. There is injustice. There is evil. We are all participants of that evil. And the Bible says, God is angry. His anger is holy. It is the incompatibility of holiness and evil. That is his wrath. But, here is how God handled that anger. He decided to humble himself and become a man; and he decided to humble himself even to death on the cross to pay the cost of the justice that God's wrath demanded. Look, God's anger was satisfied by his love, through the cross. That is the way God's holy anger worked itself out.

We must align ourselves with the gospel of love and grace, the gospel of that Jesus came down, and that it is about the power-under, the power of the cross, the power of self-sacrificial love and *not* about the power-over, the power of anger and dominance. This means that anger does not belong in our list of fruits or weapons. Love, gentleness, and grace belong in our weapon list.

Let's look at the face of Jesus; he is looking at us who crucified him; we are the ones who deserved to be crucified for our sins. Yet, instead of anger, he demonstrates his

A Mess Worth Making
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love for us. When we are a recipient of such great mercy and grace, how can we not demonstrate gentleness to those around us?