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HOW TO BE BOTH GOOD AND MAD

Ephesians 4:26-27

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Ephesians Lesson 33

How to Be Both Good and Mad Ephesians 4:26-27

A 27-year-old man pleaded guilty to assault after he was arrested for accosting a 59-year-old woman in St. Paul, Minnesota. They were waiting for a bus when he began yelling at her, "Why don't you show me some respect?" When she took out a cell phone to call police, he hit her in the face. When a 63-year-old man intervened, the angry young man hit him with a folder, which fell on the ground as he fled. Police tracked the man down after finding his name in the folder, along with his homework from an anger management class, where he was headed when he lost his temper and hit the woman (*Flag Live* [March 6-12, 2008])! Well, I guess we can be glad that he's working on the problem!

Anger is a huge problem, not only in the world, but also in the evangelical church. During my years in the ministry, I've seen many Christian marriages break up because of abusive anger. I've even heard of pastors who use anger to intimidate and control their families and to dominate others in the church. I have seen fathers and mothers who are abusively angry towards their children, usually under the excuse of exercising biblical discipline. I've seen church members angry with other church members to the point of leaving the church, rather than be reconciled.

Almost always, those who are angry deny it. I once had an elder at my church in California whose face was red, the veins on his neck were bulging, and his fists were clenched as he vehemently said to me through clenched teeth, "I am *not* angry!" I would venture to say that there are some here today who may put on a happy face for church, but the rest of the week, you are like a smoldering volcano, waiting to erupt.

In light of the enormity of this problem, we may rightly be puzzled at Paul's command in our text, "Be angry, and do not sin." The NIV interprets the phrase with its paraphrase, "In your anger, do not sin." It is literally a command, quoted from the Septuagint version of Psalm 4:4: "Be angry, and do not sin." Why would Paul command us to be angry, especially in light of what he commands

just a few verses later (4:31), that we put away “all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor” [yelling]?

The NIV paraphrase is one interpretation, that Paul is acknowledging that we all get angry, but is telling us not to sin when we do. But it stretches the grammar to take that interpretation. It is better to say that Paul is using the citation of Psalm 4 to say that we should be angry about some things, but even then we need to be careful so that it does not become sinful anger.

In the context of Psalm 4, David is being falsely accused by his enemies who are seeking his life. In verse 4, he is probably addressing his over-zealous supporters, who would quickly settle accounts by giving vent to their fierce anger (see Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-72* [IVP], p. 56). The Hebrew verb is literally, “Tremble,” which the translators of the LXX understood to be, “tremble with anger.” The idea is, “Be angry enough so that you don’t passively acquiesce to sin, but don’t allow your anger to boil over into sinful vengeance or excessive reaction.”

Keep in mind that Paul is telling us specific ways in which we need to put off the old way of life and put on the new. One characteristic of the world is that worldly people do not get angry about the right things. They see sins that destroy people, shrug their shoulders and say, “Whatever!” Or, even worse, they laugh at these sins as they are portrayed on the evil sitcoms on TV. In this apathy toward sin, they are very un-godlike.

God hates sin and He displays His righteous wrath against it (Rom. 1:18). Since sin destroys people, God would be neither righteous nor loving if He did not hate sin with a holy passion. And, if we want to be godly people, we must learn to hate sin. First of all we must hate and be angry at sin in ourselves. We must take the log out of our own eye first! But, also, we must be angry at the sin and injustice that we see in the world. But, in our righteous anger, we must be careful, lest we fall into sin. So Paul here is saying,

When you are righteously angry, deal with it promptly,
carefully, and biblically, so that the devil does not
gain an opportunity in your life.

All of the sins that Paul deals with in this section (4:25-5:2) disrupt the unity of the body (which is the theme of 4:1-16). The

positive actions and attitudes that we are to put on in place of these sinful behaviors all contribute to the unity of the body. Our motive in seeking to preserve the unity of the body should be to glorify our Lord, who gave Himself for the church. With that in mind, let's think about how to apply Paul's command here.

1. Righteous anger is a God-given emotion that can help if you process it biblically.

As I said, righteous anger is an attribute of God. It reflects His settled opposition to and hatred of sin. Jesus, who never sinned, was righteously angry. When the Pharisees opposed Jesus for healing on the Sabbath, Mark 3:5 states of Jesus, "After looking around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart. . . ." Although the Bible does not use the word "anger" to describe Jesus' cleansing of the temple, it does not require a stretch of imagination to conclude that He was very angry with the sin of those who were making a profit in that place of worship. The same may be said when He pronounced woe after woe on the Jewish religious leaders for leading the people astray (Matthew 23). When He comes again in power and glory, He will tread "the wine press of the fierce wrath of God the Almighty" (Rev. 19:15).

This means that as we grow to be more like Jesus, we will also grow in righteous anger towards sin. First and foremost, we should be angry at our own sin, which should lead us to take whatever drastic steps are needed to deal with it. In Matthew 5:21-22, Jesus links the sin of anger with the command against murder and says that those who do not deal with this sin are headed for hell. A few verses later, He says the same thing about the sin of lust, telling us to pluck out our eye or cut off our hand, rather than go to hell. He did not mean it literally, of course, but He used this graphic, drastic language to say that we must hate our sin with a passion.

And, with proper constraint and carefulness (which I will describe in a moment), we need to be righteously angry at sin in others. I would probably never write a letter to the editor of the paper if I didn't get angry about what I read there. The anger motivates me to proper action. I would never go to the hassle of confronting someone in sin if I were not angry and grieved at how the sin is destroying lives.

So, if you hear of a man who is ruining his family because of sexual sin or because of sinful anger, you should get angry. If you hear of someone who is dividing a local church over petty issues or by spreading gossip, anger is a proper response. If you hear of a little child who is being mistreated, it should anger you. Anger is the proper response in each situation because it is God's response. We have to be very careful in how we process our anger, but we would be wrong *not* to be angry in those situations, because apathy towards sin is not a godly response.

I might add that even unbiblical anger may be useful, in that it often reveals blind spots in your life that you need to address. Just as what you laugh about reveals much of your heart, so also what you get mad about reveals much of your heart. My anger at slow drivers who don't let you pass reveals my impatience, which is sin. This leads to the second point:

2. When you are angry, you must determine whether it is righteous or unrighteous anger.

This is not always an easy task, because anger is a strong emotion, and when you are emotional, you're not very rational! So you need to cool down enough to think rationally and biblically about your anger. God confronted Cain with his anger by asking (Gen. 4:6), "Why are you angry?" Of course, God wasn't puzzled about Cain's anger! He wanted Cain to analyze his own anger (see, also, Jonah 4:4). Matthew Henry (*Matthew Henry's Commentary* [Scripture Truth Book Company], 6:707) cites one who says, "If we would be angry and not sin, we must be angry at nothing but sin; and we should be more jealous for the glory of God than for any interest or reputation of our own." That's a helpful guideline!

- A. Righteous anger is a reaction to sin or injustice, usually against others.

As I said, we need to be angry at our own sin, but when someone sins against us, we need to be careful. We may feel angry, but we need to check our anger and respond with compassion and understanding towards the other person. Remember the parable that Jesus told (Matt. 18:23-35) about the slave who owed his master an astronomical sum, which the master graciously forgave. Then the slave went out and grabbed a fellow slave who owed him

far less by comparison, but couldn't repay. In a rage had him thrown into prison. A major point of that story is that when we are wronged, we need to keep in mind how much God has forgiven us, so that we show compassion towards those who have wronged us.

But when we see someone else who is sinned against or we see some terrible injustice that is done towards a class of people, it should move us to enough anger to take action as we are able. I realize that we must pick our battles or else our every waking moment would be consumed with speaking out against the abundant evils of our culture. But I can't help but wonder whether our nation would have abolished or greatly restricted abortion on demand if more Christians had expressed outrage at this terrible sin. Would our culture tolerate pornography, gambling, and drunkenness, if God's people wrote letters to legislators and to newspapers, speaking out against these destructive sins? When we see sin or injustice against others, it should move us to righteous anger, which should motivate us to action. But, we must be careful because it is easy to confuse righteous anger with unrighteous.

B. Unrighteous anger is a reaction based almost always on selfishness.

If you analyze your own anger, you will probably come to the embarrassing conclusion, as I have, that most of it stems from pure selfishness. Like a two-year-old throwing a tantrum, I am angry because I wanted my way and I didn't get my way! I had a right to something and my rights were violated! Even most frustration, which is borderline anger, stems from the same thing. I want to get somewhere in a hurry, and this stupid driver ahead of me is going under the speed limit. I'm frustrated because I'm not getting my way! Or, if others don't see things my way, I'm frustrated with their "insensitivity" or "stupidity." All of these angry feelings stem from my inherent selfishness. All such anger is really ultimately directed against the sovereign God. If He would just do it my way, I wouldn't be in these frustrating circumstances! It's embarrassing, but if you will analyze your own anger, I think you'll agree that most of it is due to simple selfishness.

Also, in the Bible anger is almost always sinful if it is quickly and explosively expressed. Paul says that love is both patient and not provoked (1 Cor. 13:4, 5). James 1:19-20 states, "But everyone

must be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger; for the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God." Proverbs 17:14 states, "The beginning of strife is like letting out water, so abandon the quarrel before it breaks out." The picture is that of the devastation that happens when a dam breaks. You will hear people say, "I just explode and then it's all over!" Yes, just like a bomb—but look at the devastation!

Paul says, "Be angry and do not sin" (the NASB translators added *yet*). How can we be angry and at the same time avoid sin?

3. Deal with all anger promptly, carefully, and biblically.

We will deal further with unrighteous anger when we get to verses 31-32. But for now, here are seven ways to deal with your anger in a prompt, careful, and biblical manner:

A. Control your anger.

You may be thinking, "That's my problem! I can't control it! Before I even think about it, I explode. I just have a short fuse!" But, the truth of the matter is that you *can* control it. You just do not *want* to control it, because controlling it means judging your own selfishness, which is at the root of most of it.

You can control your anger because God commands it. Often in Scripture God commands us to control our anger. He would not do so if it were impossible. The fruit of the Spirit is self-control, which certainly includes the control of anger. Not to control your anger is to deny the power of the gospel in your life and it is to deny the principle of the one body of Christ. If you smash your thumb with a hammer, you don't cut off the thumb in anger for getting in the way, or whack off the hand that held the hammer for being so careless. Rather, you nurture the sore thumb back to health because it's part of your body. If you remember that you are members of the same body with other believers, you will control your anger.

Furthermore, you can control your anger because your experience proves it. Suppose for the sake of illustration (this is *purely* hypothetical!), you and your mate are having an angry quarrel when the phone rings. I am on the other end. How do you speak with me? In a cheery voice you instantly turn off your anger and say, "Hello, pastor! Yes, we're all fine around here!" You're controlling

your anger instantly because you don't want to be embarrassed. You do the same thing at work when your boss irritates you. You control your anger because you don't want to lose your job. So you *can* control your anger. It's just that often you don't *want* to!

But the Bible is clear that all uncontrolled anger is sin. When Shechem violated Dinah, the daughter of Jacob, Jacob was sinfully apathetic about it. Jacob's sons were rightly grieved over the incident, because it was a shameful thing (Gen. 34:7). But then they wrongly allowed their righteous anger to move them to sin. They deceived the men of the city, so that they could slaughter the entire male population, loot the city, and take the women and children as captives. What began as righteous anger got out of control and ended in cruelty and violence (see Gen. 49:7).

- B. Analyze your anger as to whether it is righteous, unrighteous, or mixed.

I've already touched on this, but I mention it again because it's a tricky process. Often, even righteous anger gets mixed up with selfish motives. Maybe I'm in a theological debate, defending God's truth with a fair amount of passion. Maybe, but often my passion is not so much for God's glory as it is for my being right! So you have to sort it all out and judge your pride.

- C. Be careful with all anger, since it can easily move from righteous to unrighteous.

As I said, Jacob's sons were probably righteously angry, but they let it move into sinful anger. We are so easily governed by selfish motives that we need to be very careful when we feel angry. When a village of the Samaritans would not receive Jesus, James and John were indignant. They asked Jesus (Luke 9:54), "Lord, do You want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?" They could have cited chapter and verse for that response, because that's what Elijah the prophet did when the king of Israel sent soldiers to arrest him (2 Kings 1:9-16). But, Jesus rebuked James and John for their lack of compassion! So, be careful!

- D. If your anger is righteous, prayerfully think through a course of action that will bring glory to God by furthering His righteous purpose.

This applies to disciplining your children or to confronting your mate or confronting someone in the church who has sinned against you. Your aim should never be to win or to show them who is right. Your aim should be to help the other person grow in godliness and maturity. While anger may motivate you to take action, the action you take must be done with gentleness and kindness, looking to yourself, lest you, too, be tempted (Gal. 6:1; 2 Tim. 2:24-26). It is *always* sinful to hit your child with frustration or uncontrolled anger. It is *always* sinful angrily to call someone names or to put him down. These kinds of angry reactions do not further the righteousness of God (James 1:20).

E. Allow your righteous anger to motivate you to prompt action.

When Paul says, “do not let the sun go down on your anger,” he is not speaking literally. If he were, an Eskimo could stay angry all summer! Rather, Paul meant, be prompt in dealing with it so that it doesn’t fester into unrighteous anger or bitterness. As Jesus said (Matt. 5:23-24), if you’re worshiping and there remember that you’re at odds with your brother, go be reconciled immediately and then come back and worship. If you leave the house after an angry exchange with your wife, call her the instant that you are convicted of your sin. Or, if you are righteously angry about something, take prayerful action as you as you can. Don’t let the anger grow into bitterness or rage.

F. Attack the problem, not the person.

I know, sometimes this is a difficult thing to sort out, because the person is the problem! But your aim should be to help restore the person, not to win or to prove that you are right. Remember your own shortcomings and sins, so that you go with humility and compassion. Emphasize that you desire to have the relationship with the person restored.

G. Be careful to manifest the fruit of the Spirit, even when you are righteously angry.

Paul tells Timothy (2 Tim. 2:24-25), “The Lord’s bond-servant must not be quarrelsome, but be kind to all, able to teach, patient when wronged, with gentleness correcting those who are in opposition, if perhaps God may grant them repentance leading to the

knowledge of the truth.” Kindness, patience, and gentleness are all fruits of the Spirit, the first of which is love. Even when you’re righteously angry, you must speak the truth in love. In 4:27, Paul adds the reason why we must deal even with righteous anger in a careful, biblical, and prompt manner:

4. If you do not deal with anger in a biblical manner, you give the devil an opportunity in your life.

Unrighteous anger opens the door of your life so that the enemy can come in and wreak havoc! Calvin rightly says (*Sermons on Ephesians* [Banner of Truth], p. 450) that verse 27 ought to make the hair on our heads stand up! Satan is a hideous enemy who seeks to destroy and devour you like a roaring lion (1 Pet. 5:8). If there were a lion loose in your neighborhood, I’m sure you’d lock all your doors at night!. Sinful anger leaves your door ajar against the lion prowling for souls! If you don’t want a lion loose inside your house, you’ve got to deal with your anger biblically!

Conclusion

The Scottish hymn writer, George Matheson, said, “There are times when I do well to be angry, but I have mistaken the times.” He is right! There are times when it is sin to be apathetic, but be careful! It is so easy to justify sinful anger by labeling it as righteous. It is possible to be both good *and* mad, but we must deal with it promptly, carefully, and biblically, so that the enemy does not gain a foothold in our lives.

Application Questions

1. Since there is so much sin and injustice in the world, how can we know when we should take action against it?
2. Since we’re all so prone to self-justification, how can we objectively evaluate whether our anger is righteous or not?
3. Agree/disagree: Most anger stems from selfishness or wounded pride?
4. Is it right to use some vehemence to express righteous anger (*e.g.*, the biblical prophets)? When do we go overboard?

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