

Pastor Steven J. Cole
Flagstaff Christian Fellowship
123 S. Beaver Street
Flagstaff, Arizona 86001
www.fcfonline.org

TAMING YOUR TEMPER

Ephesians 4:31-32

By

Steven J. Cole

May 4, 2008

© Steven J. Cole, 2008

For access to previous sermons or to subscribe to weekly sermons via email go to: www.fcfonline.org/sermons

Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture
Quotations are from the New American
Standard Bible, Updated Edition
© The Lockman Foundation

May 4, 2008
Ephesians Lesson 37

Taming Your Temper Ephesians 4:31-32

A "Peanuts" cartoon shows Linus venting his hostility by throwing rocks into a vacant lot. As he hurls each rock, he shouts, "This is for all the nasty thing they said about George Washington! This is for people who hate little kids! And this is for people who kick dogs! This is for hot summer nights! And this is for cold winter mornings! And this is for lies and broken promises!" Then he turns and asks Charlie Brown, "Do you have any requests?"

If only it were that easy to tame your temper! But even Linus comes to realize, a couple of cartoons later, that throwing rocks is no solution for his anger. Neither is pounding a pillow as you think of the person you hate or letting out a primal scream.

Uncontrolled anger is a huge problem in our society. We frequently read about road rage, sometimes to the extreme where one angry motorist shoots and kills another motorist over some minor frustration. A *Reader's Digest* article (Oct., 2007) gave numerous examples of parents who watch their children's sports activities and erupt in anger to the point of attacking other parents and even the children competing against their children! One father beat another father to death after a youth hockey practice! Another dad clubbed his daughter's high school softball coach repeatedly in the head and body with an aluminum bat because the coach had suspended the girl for missing a game to attend the prom. The article stated that three-fourths of parents who have attended a youth sporting event have witnessed other parents being verbally abusive. One in seven have witnessed an actual physical altercation involving a parent!

You may think, "Well, that's the world for you!" But, you would be naïve to think that Christians are exempt from anger. Angry people often split churches, usually under the pretense of maintaining doctrinal purity. Christian homes are often torn apart by anger. I have shared with you before about the time that Marla and I attended a Pastors and Wives conference, where the couple in the room next to us were screaming at each other and calling each other terrible names. We thought that maybe they were prac-

ting for a skit! But sad to say, there was no skit! This was a pastor of an evangelical church! How could he possibly pray for God's blessing on his ministry when he treated his wife in that way? Christian parents yell angrily at their children, call them names, and even hit them in anger. Then they wonder why their children rebel!

The apostle Paul does not give us an inch of wiggle room when it comes to the sin of anger: "Let *all* bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with *all* malice" (Eph. 4:31, emphasis added). He repeats the word *all* twice for emphasis. Getting rid of all except a little bit of anger isn't good enough! You can't justify it by saying, "Well, I'm only human! Everyone gets angry, but I'm on the top end of the curve!" We need to call it what the Bible calls it: Anger is sin and we cannot tolerate a little bit of sin in our lives. Paul says that we must put away *all* of it.

You may be thinking, "But what about verse 26? Didn't Paul command us to be righteously angry?" You may be justifying much of your anger as righteous anger. But F. F. Bruce (*The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians* [Eerdmans], p. 364) is surely correct in observing, "This mention of anger as something that is bad without qualification, so soon after v. 26, suggests that to be angry without sinning is as rare as it is difficult." I refer you to that message for a more complete treatment. But the distinguishing mark of sinful anger is selfishness: I didn't get my way and I want my way! I didn't get my rights and I demand my rights! We sinfully use anger to try to dominate and control others. If we justify it by thinking, "I'm the head of this household," or, "I'm the boss around here," we are only masking our selfish sinfulness.

By piling up all of these words for anger and by using the word *all* twice, Paul is slamming the door on all of the excuses that he knew we would try to use to justify our sinful anger. He is saying that as those who have been created anew in righteousness and holiness of the truth (4:24), we must get rid of *all* sinful anger.

To tame your temper, put off all bitterness and anger and
replace it with kindness and forgiveness,
just as God in Christ forgave you.

He makes three points, which we will follow: First, he uses six terms to describe the old, sinful behavior that we must put off.

Then, he uses three terms to describe the new, godly behavior that we are to put on. Finally, he gives us the motive or reason why we should adopt this new behavior.

1. To tame your temper, put off all bitterness and anger (4:31).

We need to begin by observing that Paul does not psychologize the problem of anger by saying that you must understand your childhood or probe your “subconscious” to get at the root reasons that you are angry. Maybe your parents didn’t love you, or maybe you have “low self-esteem.” He doesn’t go there! He basically says, “Stop sinning!” Put away all anger as you would cast off dirty, smelly clothes!

But, lest you think that this is just a matter of human will power, remember that verses 25-32 are built on verses 20-24, where Paul describes the supernatural new birth that God imparts to us. Before salvation, we were darkened in our understanding, excluded from the life of God, and given over to all manner of sin (4:17-19). But now we are new creatures in Christ and as such we have been taught a new way of life. We are to put off the old man, be renewed in the spirit of our minds, and put on the new man in Christ (4:22-24).

Furthermore, we now have the Holy Spirit dwelling within us and we are to live in a close relationship with Him so that we do not grieve Him (4:30). We are to be filled or controlled by the Spirit, who enables us not to fulfill the sinful desires of the flesh, but rather to produce His fruit of righteousness in us (Eph. 5:18; Gal. 5:16-23). But the Spirit-filled life is not entirely passive, where we just “let go and let God.” We have an active role to play, where we fight daily against the sinful desires that tempt us and yield to the Holy Spirit in obedience to God’s Word.

Also, as I often emphasize, to overcome sin it is vital to recognize that all sin originates in the heart or mind. Sinful anger is a heart issue and so you must deal with it on the heart level (Mark 7:21-23). This means that it is not enough to force a smile and restrain yourself while you are seething inside. At the instant you begin to feel angry, you must deal with how you think. You must stop long enough to think, “God is sovereign and He has allowed this

difficult situation for my training in righteousness. Any anger that I express towards the other person is really anger towards God, who has providentially allowed this. Also, I am a fellow sinner, as seen in my quickness towards anger. I must treat the other person with love, just as I would want to be treated." And you send up a quick, "Help, Lord" prayer, that He would control your emotions, words, and actions in this situation.

Also, to point out the obvious, Paul's commands here imply that you have been mistreated. You wouldn't be bitter if everyone treated you rightly. You wouldn't be harboring malice if others had been nice towards you. You wouldn't need to forgive if others had not wronged you. So, Paul is showing us how to respond in a godly way in an ungodly world where people wrong us.

There may be a progression in Paul's use of these terms (Peter O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians* [Apollos/Eerdmans], p. 349). He moves from a resentful inner attitude (bitterness) through its outward expression in outbursts of rage and seething anger, to yelling abusively (clamor). Then he mentions spreading our anger by slander. He concludes with a catch-all term that covers all forms of anger, namely, malice. Let's look at each word.

A. Remove all bitterness from your heart.

Bitterness develops over time as we nurse our anger and tell ourselves that we have good cause to be angry. We play the situation where we got angry over and over in our minds, often blaming the other person and justifying ourselves. The bitter person refuses to forgive or be reconciled. He wants to make the other person pay. Bitter people keep score. I once counseled a woman who pulled out a notebook with 16 pages detailing every major wrong that her husband had committed against her over the years. She thought that she had an airtight case that justified her anger. I glanced at it and said, "The first thing you need to do is to burn this notebook!" She didn't like that advice!

Hebrews 12:15 warns, "See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble, and by it many be defiled." Your bitterness will defile others who are close to you. But, even worse, if you continue in bitterness, you will come short of the grace of God! If you need any-

thing from God, it is abundant grace! So you've got to put all bitterness away from you. Vengeance belongs to God alone. One way to root out bitterness from your heart is to pray for the offending person—not that he will get hit with God's judgment—but rather that he will find mercy and repentance.

B. Remove all wrath from your heart.

The NIV translates it, *rage*. It is derived from a word meaning, *to boil*. It refers to outbursts of anger, when someone boils over. It is used to describe the people in the synagogue in Nazareth, whose rage at Jesus drove them to try to throw Him over the edge of a cliff (Luke 4:28). It is used of the rage of the mob in Ephesus that led to the riot against the Christians (Acts 19:28). Paul says that such hot anger has no place among believers.

C. Remove all anger from your heart.

This is the same word that Paul used to refer to righteous anger (4:26). It is used of Jesus' righteous anger (Mark 3:5). It is used of God's wrath (John 3:36; Rom. 1:18; 12:19), which is His settled hatred of and opposition to all sin. With reference to sinful human anger, *wrath* and *anger* are largely synonymous. If there is a nuance of difference, *wrath* is the sudden outburst of temper, whereas *anger* refers to a more settled attitude, often with the purpose of revenge.

D. Remove all clamor from your heart.

Clamor refers to loud, angry words, where people are screaming at each other. It includes cursing and calling someone abusive names. The only time you should yell at your mate or your children is to warn them of immediate danger. Sometimes you have to yell to be heard over the noise. But once things quiet down, you should *talk*, not yell.

E. Remove all slander from your heart.

The Greek word is also used for blasphemy against God, but here it refers to speaking evil about someone to someone else who has no need to hear it. Usually, we do this to build our case against the person, so that we look like the innocent victim. Often, slander is accompanied by falsehood, where we stretch the truth or only give enough information to tilt the verdict in our direction.

F. Remove all malice from your heart.

Malice is a general term for wickedness or ill will towards another person. It is the desire to harm the person, either emotionally or physically. When coupled with slander, the intent is to harm the person's reputation or his relationships with others by smearing him. I think that Paul added it at the end to cover any other form of hatred or anger that we might try to justify as okay. Paul commands us to remove all six of these sinful attitudes and actions. They characterize unbelievers, but they have no place with those who are being conformed to the image of Jesus Christ.

2. To tame your temper, actively engage in the process of replacing bitterness and anger with kindness, tenderheartedness, and forgiveness (4:32a).

As we have seen, Paul's pattern here is not only to have us stop doing the evil behavior, but also to begin practicing godly behavior. We are to replace lying with telling the truth (4:25). We are to stop stealing and instead work hard and give to those in need (4:28). We are to stop using unwholesome words and instead use words that build up and give grace (4:29). So here, sinful anger is to be replaced with kindness, tenderheartedness, and forgiveness.

- A. To tame your temper is a process that you must actively engage in.

The Greek word translated "be" (4:32) means *to become*. It is a present imperative verb, indicating an ongoing process. The process begins when you face up to your bitterness and anger as sin and confess it to God, asking for His forgiveness. You choose to accept responsibility for your sin, rather than to blame others. At that point you begin a lifelong battle. You will never arrive at a point where you can declare permanent victory and lay down your weapons. But as you fight the temptation to be angry, you (and others that know you) should see noticeable progress. If you lose a battle, don't give up. Confess it to God, seek forgiveness from those you have wronged, and get back in the battle.

- B. To tame your temper, replace bitterness and anger with kindness.

Paul says that love is kind (1 Cor. 13:4). Kindness is a fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22). A kind person is not harsh or sharp with others. He allows others room to offend or make mistakes without

becoming offended and crawling all over them. A kind person takes an interest in others and tries to understand what they are feeling by asking sensitive questions. God Himself is “kind to ungrateful and evil men” (Luke 6:35). His kindness leads us to repentance (Rom. 2:4). Tasting His kindness motivates us to long for the pure milk of the word, so that we may grow in respect to salvation (1 Pet. 2:2-3). Dads, instead of being harsh and stern with your children, be kind. It will motivate them to obedience far more than anger ever will.

- C. To tame your temper, replace bitterness and anger with tender-heartedness.

The NIV translates this as *compassionate*. It is used in 1 Peter 3:8-9a, “To sum up, all of you be harmonious, sympathetic, brotherly, *kindhearted*, and humble in spirit; not returning evil for evil or insult for insult, but giving a blessing instead.” It comes from the Greek word for “bowels,” which they saw as the seat of our emotions. To be tender-hearted means to have deep, “gut” feelings for one another. It means to have genuine concern for another person’s well-being. It is the opposite of being calloused, as we were before we met Christ (4:19).

- D. To tame your temper, replace bitterness and anger with forgiveness.

Instead of holding a grudge that develops into bitterness, we are to forgive those that have wronged us. The word used here points to undeserved favor. It implies that the other person has truly wronged us. To forgive is to choose to absorb the pain and show grace to the other person. If he has to earn it, it’s not forgiveness. If you put it on file and bring it up every time there is a disagreement, it’s not forgiveness. If it doesn’t cost you anything to grant it, it’s not forgiveness. I plan to devote our next study to probe this important topic more in depth, so I move on for now.

Thus Paul says that to tame your temper, put off all bitterness and anger and replace it with kindness and forgiveness. Then he gives us the profound motive or reason we must do this:

- 3. To tame your temper, remember as foremost how God in Christ has forgiven you (4:32b).

Begin every day at the foot of the cross, marveling at the amazing grace of God that sent His own Son to bear the wrath that you deserved. As the psalmist puts it (Ps. 130:3-4), "If You, Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand? But there is forgiveness with You, that You may be feared." Briefly consider:

A. God forgave you by His grace, not because of any merit.

If you think that you somehow earned or deserved God's forgiveness because of your good works, you do not understand the gospel. The fact is, each of us has wronged God tens of thousands of times from childhood up. Even if you were raised in the church and trusted Christ as a child, your sins are too numerous to count. God's forgiveness is by grace alone. So we must grant forgiveness to others not because they deserve it, but rather because we have been shown grace.

B. God forgave you at great cost.

He forgave you "in Christ." That means that He couldn't just shrug off your sins as no big deal. To do that would have compromised His justice and holiness. Jesus, the eternal Son of God, came and bore on the cross the penalty we deserved. While forgiving others is never that costly for us, it still costs. There may be a legitimate place for requiring restitution as a means of teaching responsibility. But even then, forgiveness is costly.

C. God forgave you far more than you can ever forgive anyone else.

Jesus graphically made this point in response to Peter's question about forgiveness (Matt. 18:21-35). He told the parable of the slave who owed a king 10,000 talents. A talent was worth more than 15 years' wages for a laborer, so 10,000 talents represented 150,000 years' wages, an unpayable debt. When the man begged for mercy, the king freely forgave the entire amount. But then the slave went out and grabbed a fellow slave who owed him 100 denarii, about 100 days' wages. When he couldn't pay, the forgiven slave had him thrown into prison. The king was moved with righteous anger towards the unforgiving slave. The point of the story is, no one could have wronged you as much as you have wronged God. Since He freely forgave you, so you must forgive others. I'll deal

further with forgiveness next time, as it raises a number of difficult questions.

Conclusion

I conclude with some practical steps to apply Paul's words. First and foremost, *make sure that you have received God's forgiveness through faith in Christ alone*. There are unsaved people who have gone to anger management courses and learned to control their anger, but they will go to hell unless they repent of their sins and trust in Christ alone. The new birth is the foundation for the radical change of behavior described in our text.

Second, *allow your heart to be humbled by God's grace every day*. Think about the wrath that you justly deserve. Think about where you would be if God had not graciously drawn you to the cross. As you are filled to the brim with God's grace, it will spill over onto those who wrong you. Where formerly you would have been angry, now you will be kind, tender-hearted, and forgiving.

Third, *structure your life for change*. Turn off the TV (which will never make you godly) and read your Bible. Memorize verses such as our text, so that they immediately pop into your mind when you are tempted to be angry. Pray frequently for those you are prone to be angry with. If you live with them, pray often *with* them. It is really difficult to remain angry with your mate or kids when you get on your knees together before the throne of grace!

Finally, *confess your anger quickly and ask the Holy Spirit to control your mind and emotions*. Don't let angry thoughts fester. Don't let your anger go unconfessed. Ask God's forgiveness and ask forgiveness of the one you sinned against. It's a lifelong battle, but if you engage in the fight, by God's grace you will tame your temper.

Application Questions

1. Since anger is in large part a feeling, how can God command us not to be angry? At what point does the feeling become sin?
2. Proverbs22:24-25 tells us not to associate with an angry person, lest we learn his ways. What do you do if you're married to him or her?
3. Is it hypocritical to be kind to someone when you'd rather punch him? Why/why not?
4. God asks Cain, "Why are you angry?" (Gen. 4:6). Is that a helpful question to deal with your anger? Why/why not?

Copyright, Steven J. Cole, 2008, All Rights Reserved.