

II Samuel 18: 5-9, 15, 31-33  
Psalm 130  
Ephesians 4: 25-5: 2  
St. John 6: 35, 41-51

Pentecost 12 2024.

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“Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger.”

Ephesians 4: 26

The Letter to the Ephesians is divided roughly into 2 parts: The first part, chapters 1 to 3, present the great overarching story of the gospel – that we are saved by grace through faith; that Christ is the head of the Church; that both Jews and foreigners, Gentiles, are reconciled together through the finished work of Jesus; and so on... Roughly the first half of Ephesians presents the theological facts about Jesus Christ, and about belonging to his Body, the whole Church of God...

The *second* part of Ephesians is much more practical; down to earth... Chapters 4 to 6 teach us about Christian maturity, learning to leave behind sinful habits; about relationships within our households and places of employment; resisting temptation; and so on. The later part of Ephesians is far more practical...

In the ancient world, it was considered a complement for a pupil to sign the name of his teacher, his master, when writing... There are slight changes in phrases and wording between Ephesians and other letters attributed to St. Paul, leading some Bible teachers to wonder if Paul himself held the pen, or if Paul dictated or directed a young disciple to write Ephesians...

Ephesians is within the canon of scripture, inspired and authoritative, so we need to pay attention to this message, and apply it... I find it simpler to say simply that Paul was the author (although it wouldn't disturb me after I die to learn that someone close to Paul actually held the pen, having learned these teachings from Paul himself). For any folks here who might not want me to call this “*Paul's*” Letter to the Ephesians, I hope you'll just bear with me!... I just call it, Paul's Letter to the Ephesians...

So, today's second reading is from Ephesians 4. This is part of the “practical” part of Ephesians, and Paul writes something I suggest we take note of. Among all the practical instructions about working honestly and watching what we say, are these words: “Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger...” “Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger...” Paul is expecting his readers – that includes you and me – he is expecting us to get angry sometimes! He doesn't want us to *stay* angry for a long time... He wants us to get over whatever got us worked up in the first place, by the time the sun goes down... So, in this passage, it's expected that we'll *get* angry sometimes – Paul just doesn't want us to *stay* angry...

This message is in contrast, though, with other passages in the Bible: “Anger” is on a list of things which Christians aren’t supposed to do! Colossians 3 reads,

Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry). On account of these the wrath of God is coming on those who are disobedient. These are the ways you also once followed, when you were living that life. **But now you must get rid of all such things—anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language from your mouth...**

So, Paul is telling the Colossians *not* to get angry... James reads that we aren’t to get angry quickly: “You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God’s righteousness (1: 19-20).” So, should we get angry sometimes – or not at all?...

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus Christ warns us that anger, rage, can diminish our closeness with God: “But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgement...”

Yet Jesus himself was furious with people who abused the use of the temple, the money-changers and the merchants. John 2: 14-17:

In the temple [Jesus] found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money-changers seated at their tables. Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables. He told those who were selling the doves, ‘Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father’s house a market-place!’ His disciples remembered that it was written, ‘Zeal for your house will consume me.’

Our Lord was rip-roaring furious!...

Anger is presented as an attribute of God: God hates the sin which damages and destroys our lives (like idolatry). II Kings 17: 18: “Therefore the Lord was very angry with Israel and removed them out of his sight; none was left but the tribe of Judah alone...”

There are lots of other Bible verses we can refer to– about people being angry; about God being angry; about how we’re not supposed to get angry; or bad things which can happen when we’re angry. What are we supposed to do with all this?...

Some of us may have been raised in homes in which there were complex messages about anger, or other emotions. One of my older relatives (now deceased) told me frankly that she grew up in a very strict Christian home, and she wasn’t allowed to show some of her

emotions to her mother... She was allowed to show the “[quote-unquote] *good* feelings” – like laughter... But she wasn’t allowed to show “*bad*” feelings as a child, like anger or tears... It was really hard for her to overcome those painful and inappropriate childhood directions...

It’s easy to get confused about all this, isn’t it?... Are we supposed to get angry, or not? Is anger part of the Christian life, or not?...

To put all this together, I suggest there are a few things to keep in mind. One is about emotions in general. The other issue about motivation – motivation: That is, *why* do we do the things we do...

Contrary to what some Christians have taught, I firmly believe that it is not theologically correct, nor biblically accurate, to suggest that we shouldn’t have feelings or emotions. Of course we have them; that is part of being human! Scripture, and the tradition of the Church, are full of stories of people like us who – yes! – who showed their feelings, including, sometimes being angry...

Let’s look to Jesus Christ himself, our Model. Hebrews 4 records, Jesus Christ is human and “tempted as we are, yet without sin...” Jesus Christ seems to have been very free about expressing his emotions: He wept at the grave of his friend Lazarus. As already mentioned, Jesus got very angry at the misuse of the temple courts.

I imagine Jesus must have been a great guy to have at a dinner party (even if he ate with some sketchy people). He would have been in the centre of the party, in the midst of brokenness and people daring to hope for a new Messiah... Imagine going to a picnic with Jesus! 5000 men, besides women and children? 2 fish and 5 barley loaves? No problem!... Jesus Christ was fully human, alive and engaged with others; tender to the broken; patient with the confused; sharp with the hypocrites and the legalistic directions about the Sabbath rest...

I suspect it’s a cultural phenomenon that some people find it hard to express their emotions. Some people with British backgrounds don’t find it easy. On the other hand, Jewish people – and remember, Jesus was Jewish – tend to be very comfortable expressing their emotions... So, the issue is not emotions in themselves... It’s good to be aware of our emotions, our feelings... Yet, the question we need to face, then, is this: *Why* am I feeling the way I am?...

Anger seems to have 2 basic causes. Sometimes we get angry because our pride has been hurt. Sometimes we get angry because of injustice. It’s usually one or the other. Perhaps we feel personally threatened or injured; or we are reacting to something wrong in the world...

God is righteously angry at sin... Sin doesn't always seem so bad to us. (Many people, unfortunately, are very comfortable with their sins!) We don't always see the results of sin at the time, and so we might think, "Oh, it's not too bad..."

But God is perfectly holy. God sees most clearly what sin can do to us. The kingdom of hell is full of deception, of rebellion against God's goodness... In this world, the natural world, all too often, we want to overlook the seriousness of sin. The place of perfection, to see things as they truly are – truly beautiful, or truly ugly – is the kingdom of heaven... God loves us, more than we can ever understand. And he hates all that hurts us, either right away or in the long run... Anger at sin is appropriate...

It's also appropriate to be angry at injustice... When we see an innocent child suffer because of an adult's carelessness or neglect, for instance, it's appropriate for us to think, "That's not fair!" Some things in this world are profoundly unjust, and when we get angry about it, it's because we sense deep down that something is wrong, and that something should be done about it...

Anger at injustice shouldn't be an end in itself, though... Properly, anger at injustice ought to motivate us to action, to help bring God's kingdom priorities into this broken world... Those of us who have taken the Alpha Course recently, for instance, can be reminded of a young man who saw how unfair it was that so many people in the world didn't have clean drinking water. He proceeded to do something about it, and in a few short years, that Christian charity now provides clean drinking water to people in the millions... Anger at injustice can be a catalyst for doing God's work...

So, these are a few positive examples of anger; appropriate anger...

No doubt we are deeply aware, however, that not all anger is appropriate! Sometimes people jump to conclusions and falsely accuse. Sometimes people are grumpy and then get careless with their words. Sometimes we are confronted with our faults, and become defensive. There are lots of negative examples of inappropriate anger... What are we to do about that?...

Some of us are often tempted to be quick-tempered, and a tendency to anger can be close to the surface all our lives... If this happens to apply to us, first, let's take a long-term view. God has given us a lifetime to learn to live more beautifully for him, with the help of the Holy Spirit... One strategy some people have is to learn what the triggers for their anger are, and how we deal with these triggers in the first place. Many others find it helpful to have someone to support us and help us to be accountable in our Christian walks... Over time, the aim is to become less seized with anger because we feel provoked; to carry God's peace, and to be more loving...

There can be victories! A friend of mine back east used to be pretty hot-tempered as a young man, but over time, with the help of the Lord, and a supportive spouse, he's learned to be more measured, and is far more gracious in his older years...

Anger is a real feeling, and we shouldn't be surprised or embarrassed to have feelings. I suggest we need to become more self-aware of *why* we feel as we do... If it's because of injustice, let's help make the world a little more like heaven. If it's because of self-centred motives, then we aim for this no longer to have a claim on our lives, with God's help...

The Bible has lots to say about anger, not because it's inconsistent, but because anger itself has many causes and results. In today's second reading, St. Paul encourages us not to let anger fester within us over time. Let's choose to live beautifully for God, and to overcome sin in whatever form it takes, with God's help; now and for ever.

Amen.