

Truth for Today
The Bible teaching radio programme

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Coping with Life: How to deal with anger

Today we continue the series of talks entitled "Coping with Life". Our subject today is "How to deal with anger" and we will see what help the Bible can give us in this very practical matter. We have previously considered "How to deal with worry" and "How to deal with gossip", and God willing we will consider "How to deal with fear" next week.

The word "anger" or "angry" can be found many times in the Bible, especially in the Old Testament. In the New Testament we also need to look at words such as wrath, vengeance, indignation, fierceness and provoke to get the full picture.

The first Scripture which came to my mind was from Ephesians 4:26, "Be ye angry, and sin not." I thought, too, about the time when the Lord Jesus cleared the temple using a scourge to drive out the traders and money exchangers. I recalled the parable which Jesus told in Luke 15:11-32 telling us of a younger son who came home to a father's welcome but an elder son who was angry! I remembered the story of the prophet Jonah. Now he was an angry man! During our talk today we will refer to these instances in the Scriptures which came to mind. Perhaps you have already thought of other verses or stories in the Bible which speak of anger.

To begin my study, using a Greek concordance, I looked up all the references to "anger", found in the New Testament. I found over 100 references, and read them, noting their context. About 30 of those references have a direct bearing on our subject today and my thoughts have been formed on these. We read of God's anger, the devil's anger, and the anger of men. We know God is intrinsically holy and hates sin and yet many references are to God's anger. So we cannot say that all anger is sinful. Without any doubt there are instances where to be angry is to sin. Ephesians 4:26 warns not to sin because of our anger. Whether it is right or wrong to be angry really depends on what the source of the anger is and most importantly how it affects us. It is clear that our anger should never move us to be violent, or to seek revenge, either in word or action.

To underline this, let me read some verses from Romans 12:17-21, "Recompense to no man evil for evil. Provide things honest in the sight of all men. If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men. Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord. Therefore if thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink: for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head. Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good".

Another translation for "give place unto wrath" (Romans 12:19) is "leave room for God's wrath" (New International Version). Now this is real, practical Christianity and admittedly it's not always easy for us to react in this way when people give us cause to be angry. Perhaps you've heard people say "Don't get mad; get even", and I am sure that the thought of "getting our own back" often has an appeal to us, but these verses tell us that it is NOT for us to take revenge - "vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord" (Romans 12:19).

We often consider the "fruit of the Spirit" in Galatians 5:22-23, "love, joy, peace..." and so on, but how often do we read the previous verses, Galatians 5:19-21, which tell us in no uncertain terms that wrath (or anger), hatred and strife are amongst the "works of the flesh"? What a contrast - the "works of the flesh" and the "fruit of the Spirit"! I believe the teaching is clear, that as Christians, being angry is not prompted by the Holy Spirit! Self control would stop Christians losing their temper or becoming enraged and the fact that we sometimes "lose it" shows that the flesh is ever present. We need to "put off the old man with his deeds" as Paul tells the Colossian believers (Colossians 3:9).

Now you may say, "What about 'righteous anger'?" I have often heard Christians talking about "righteous anger", but looking at the New Testament references I mentioned earlier, I don't find the Apostles of this Christian era, the day of God's grace, showing much "righteous anger". In fact I could not find an instance where we read of the Apostles being angry. Now you might quote Matthew 20:24 where the disciples were "indignant" against James and John - but a different Greek word is used and has more the thought of displeasure and not anger.

Let's take Paul as an example. We read more about Paul's life than that of any other Apostle, but I cannot think of an occasion where we read of him being angry. If anyone had reason to be "righteously angry" then surely it was he. Think of the way he was treated at Philippi when he and Silas were imprisoned for preaching the Gospel (see Acts

16:16-40). Arrested (Acts 16:19), stripped (Acts 16:22), beaten (Acts 16:22) and then thrown into prison (Acts 16:23) - were they angry? Quite the opposite it would seem as the prisoners heard them "praying and singing praises" to God! (Acts 16:25). What was Paul's reaction when he saw the mass idolatry at Athens? (Acts 17:16) Was he angry? His spirit was "stirred in him", but again this is not anger. The Greek word used implies more a sense of exasperation and although he went on to preach "repentance" and "judgement" (Acts 17:22-34) we don't get any indication that he was "angry", not even with "righteous anger".

What was the result? There were those who believed on the Lord Jesus Christ! Or what about the treatment he received from the Jews in the Temple when they tried to kill him? Read the story from Acts 21:26-26:32 when he is examined by Felix, Festus and Agrippa and speaks in defence of the Gospel, and there's no mention of his being angry. What an example for us - to pray, praise and preach rather than to show anger.

If he was angry inwardly, (and he may have been) he was careful not to sin. If we look carefully at Paul's words in Ephesians 4:26-27, "Be ye angry, and sin not: let not the sun go down on your wrath: neither give place to the devil", we will see that he is quoting from Psalm 4:4. I judge by the context that he is emphasising that if and when we have cause to be angry, we must not allow that to lead us into a sinful response. It must not be allowed to rob us of the fellowship we have with our Lord Jesus Christ.

If we go to bed angry, our prayers are hindered (see 1 Timothy 2:8) and the devil gains a victory. I am reminded of the poet Robert Burns who tells of Tam o' Shanter's angry wife waiting for him to come home. She was "nursing her wrath to keep it warm". How often do we find ourselves holding on to our anger and "raking over the coals" to keep it alive in our hearts? It is even worse if our anger is against a fellow believer or our Lord and Saviour!

If we read on in Ephesians 4, I think this emphasis is strengthened by the fact that he speaks about "grieving the holy Spirit of God" (Ephesians 4:30). Ephesians 4:31-32 read, "Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamour, and evil speaking, be put away from you, with all malice: and be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you".

In James 1:19-20 we read, "Wherefore, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath: for the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God". It would suggest that our anger (even if it is righteous) does not work out God's desires in our lives.

We read in Titus 1:7 that a "bishop" (that is an elder or overseer) must not be easily or quickly angered. We have already quoted from 1 Timothy 2:8 that the men were to pray "without wrath and doubting". In Matthew 5:22-24 we have the Lord's teaching in relation to bringing our "gifts to the altar". If we were to apply that to our worship of God today - then surely the teaching is that an angry heart cannot worship the Father in "spirit and in truth" (see John 4:24).

We briefly mentioned Jonah (Jonah 1:1-4:11) and also the elder son in the parable Jesus told in Luke 15:11-32. Both of these men were angry and there is a striking similarity as to the reason why they were angry. Read the passages for yourself and see the grace and mercy of God shown to the people of Nineveh and to the prodigal son.

In both stories we see that consequent upon repenting from their sins, God was only too ready to have compassion towards them. In fact, in the parable the father is seen "running" to meet his returning son, covering him with kisses! (Luke 15:20). What a wonderful picture of the largeness of the heart of God who wants to bless repentant sinners!

I think the words of the younger son are of vital importance and teach us that all sin is against God. He said, "I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight" (Luke 15:21). Was he to be made a "hired servant"? Not a chance! Only the best robe, the ring and the shoes (Luke 15:22), all speaking of his position as a son, would show the full extent of the father's forgiveness and love.

So why was the elder son angry? (Luke 15:28) Why was Jonah so angry? (Jonah 4:1) It was because neither of them could come to terms with the goodness and grace of God. Jonah was a prophet and the elder son is a picture of the Pharisees (who prided themselves in their religion) and both were completely indifferent to the heart of God. God asked Jonah directly if he was right to be angry (Jonah 4:4, 9) and the sad thing was that Jonah thought he had every right to be angry (Jonah 4:9). How wrong he was and what a lesson for us today - "keep yourselves in the love of God" Jude 21 says.

Before we finish, let us consider God's anger (or wrath) for a few moments. As we have said there are numerous references to God's anger in the Old Testament but I want to concentrate on some of the New Testament references. It is no surprise that we find there are more references in the epistle to the Romans than in any of the other epistles. In Romans we get the "teaching of the Gospel" and surely the "wrath of God" is a fundamental part of the Gospel message.

In Romans 1:18 we read that “the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men”. This is a very solemn passage and one we should take the time to read. The things which the Apostle writes of men in his day are being taught and practised openly in our day. In Romans 1:25 he says that they “changed the truth of God into a lie, (or they exchanged the truth of God for a lie) and worshipped and served the creature more than the Creator, who is blessed for ever”. Later on in Romans 1:28 he says “they did not like to retain God in their knowledge”.

Is this not where we are in Britain in 2013! This great nation, once called “The land of the Bible” has in the main turned its back on God and the revelation He has given both in His Word and in His Son. It seems that men are willing to believe almost anything but God’s Word. The moral landslide we see all around us is as a result of this, just as the Apostle says in the closing verses Romans 1.

So God is angry. He has a right to be angry because mankind is indifferent to Him. We see through the parables which Jesus told in the Gospel of Matthew 22:1-14 and in Luke 14:15-24 that God is angry at the way mankind has snubbed His invitation to the great feast He has prepared. The Lord Jesus had come to this earth to make it possible for God to invite us near to Himself - but in the main, man chose to remain at a distance from God.

In John 3:16 we read, “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life”, but John 3:36 states, “He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him”. Have we moved away from preaching the “wrath of God”? If we have, then it’s not the Gospel! As we present the Lord Jesus Christ as the Saviour of all who believe on Him now - should we not also warn any who refuse Him that in a coming day He will be the judge who condemns them. Why? Because the “wrath of God abides on them”.

How thankful we should be as we read on in Romans 5:8-9, “But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, being now justified by his blood, we shall be saved from wrath through him”.

It is also recorded that the Lord Jesus Christ was angry. If we look at Mark’s Gospel, where He is viewed as God’s servant, in Mark 3:5 we read that He “looked round about on them with anger”. So concerned were the people about keeping the Sabbath that they couldn’t be happy for the man who was healed on the Sabbath but rather used the occasion to find fault with God’s servant (Mark 3:4).

Turning to John’s Gospel, where He is viewed as the Son of God, in John 2:13-17 we see Him going up to Jerusalem at Passover time. You will note from John 2:13 that the Lord’s Passover had become the “Jews” Passover”. Finding traders and money changers in the Temple precincts He made a “scourge of small cords” and drove them all out, pouring out the changers’ money and overturning the tables. He warned them not to make His Father’s house a house of merchandise (John 2:16). The disciples remembered a quotation from Psalm 69:9 in relation to His “zeal”.

From the other Gospels, we see that He cast them out a second time (although not with a scourge) just before His crucifixion (Matthew 21:12-17, Mark 11:15-19, Luke 19:45-48) and we often think of these occasions as the Lord showing His “righteous anger” - but interestingly, you won’t find the word in the text. So the Scriptures are very scarce in relation to references of our Lord Jesus being angry. I can only find the one clear reference given in Mark 3:5, the others being conjecture.

In Revelation 12:12, 17 we read of the devil’s wrath at being cast out of heaven and the dragon’s wrath against the Jewish remnant at that time. As far as I can see, these are the only two direct references to Satan’s anger but I’m sure there are times when he vents his anger through men. Take King Herod for example in Matthew 23:16 when the wise men didn’t return to him, it says he was “exceeding wroth” and he didn’t stop there - he “sent forth, and slew all the children that were in Bethlehem, and in all the coasts thereof, from two years old and under”.

Another example would be the reaction of the people in the synagogue in Luke 4:16-30. The Lord Jesus stood up and read from the book of Isaiah saying that He was anointed to “preach the gospel to the poor”, “to heal the broken hearted”, “to preach deliverance to the captives”, to recover sight to the blind”, “to set at liberty them that are bruised”, “to preach the acceptable year of the Lord” (Luke 4:18-19, Isaiah 61:1-2). You would have thought that there would have been great rejoicing - but quite the opposite was the case. In Luke 4:28 we read “And all they in the synagogue, when they heard these things, were filled with wrath”. So much so that they too tried to kill Him. Read the verses for yourself and I’m sure you will agree that this was the devil trying his best to get rid of Christ.

The Jewish leaders, the Chief Priests, the Pharisees and the Scribes were always looking to trip the Lord Jesus up and justify their rejection of Him as their Messiah. Finally when God’s time was right - it was their voices which could be heard loudest, whipping up the crowd as they called for Jesus to be crucified.

From then on there has been an irrational hatred displayed by many towards Christians. It wasn't long before men like Nero were making sport of casting these "Christ's ones" to the lions. Today in 2013 AD, the statistics for the number of Christians being persecuted are higher than at any other time in the Church's history. One source I read recently estimated that around 300 million Christians today live in fear of violence or suffer discrimination because of their faith. So Satan is still venting his anger towards those who bear the name of Christ and will continue to do so until the end of the age.

In conclusion, in this "the day of God's grace", or the "Spirit's day", we should examine our hearts carefully to see where the source of our anger lies. We can leave the judgement to God, who has committed it to the Son. He will recompense fairly and men will be judged according to their works. As we consider the goodness and grace of God shown towards us, perhaps like Jonah, God would ask us, "Have you any good reason to be angry"?

May God bless you all.

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