

LIVE|13: dANGERous (Part 1 of 4)

The Reason Anger is Treason

James 1:19-26

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"Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God. Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls. But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing. If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless." (James 1:19–26, ESV)

This Sunday we begin our annual relationship series during the month of August. Over the last five years we have taken a break from our standard diet of studying a book of the Bible to target a very specific and practical area. Over the years our series have included – "How to Kill Relationships and Irritate People," "Approval Junkie," "Be Careful Little Mouth," and "Licensed to Kill." Each of those series has been great times in our body life as a church.

Two years ago we launched LIVE as a way to drive the teaching into our small groups through a video series, to enlist a number of new people in small groups, and to whet your appetite for the practical application of God's word with the hope that you might want to take some next steps in counseling training. In other words, our aim in LIVE is to have you **get connected, get deep, and get trained**. Our pastors and elders want to see Christ formed in you, and LIVE is an important part of our strategy to see that happen in your life.

Why Talk about Anger?

For the next four weeks, Pastor Andrew Rogers and I are going to talk with you about the spiritual danger of anger. The idea for this series came out of the results of our congregational survey last year, and we were surprised with the unusually high percentage of people who struggle significantly with anger or who have a close family member who struggles with this issue.

As well, when we look at our culture it seems that there is a growing problem with anger. For instance, when I took driver's training, I do not remember any instruction regarding "road rage," but my boys had a fairly extensive chapter on what it is and how to deal with it. From an entertainment perspective, there are so many reality-television shows whose main attraction is the conflict that is created between characters. What's more, I can hardly watch a news program without the pundits arguing and shouting at each other. And the advent of social media has created a venue and even an encouragement to vent, rant, and express whatever our sinful hearts

are feeling. Add to this cultural mix, a pace of life that is way too busy with too many pressures, and it isn't long until business leads to "frazzledness," which leads to frustration and sinful anger.

It is almost as if we have become so accustomed to anger that we could be guilty of losing our sensitivity to this issue. Human beings have always been angry, but it seems that it is more tolerable, normal, or even funny these days.

But anger is dangerous – more so than what we might think. Part of the problem is that we don't see it as problematic in our lives as other sin issues. Anger is one of those sin issues that hides in plain view. It would be unacceptable to justify our lust, but it is easy to ignore the horrific consequences of anger by domesticating it. I think anger is just as deadly as lust or greed. And our tolerance of it is a significant part of the problem. So we need to talk about it, get to the root of it, see its manifestations, and turn from it.

Finally, let me speak to those of you who grew up in angry homes or even abusive homes. You probably do not need to be convinced that anger is dangerous or destructive; you've seen that first hand. But you will need to learn how to view angry people through a lens of compassion, understanding the war in the soul. And you will also need to work hard not to repeat the past. The Bible warns about how easy it is to learn the ways of an angry person (Prov. 22:24-25). Knowing anger is bad and hurtful is no guarantee that you will be any different. You could very easily repeat the pattern of anger even though you swore up and down that you would be different.

So, I think looking at the issue of anger over the next four weeks is going to be really helpful. I think that we will come to see how dangerous and deceptive this issue can be. But even more, I think we'll find that God's word has some great things to say about it.

The Reason Anger is Treason

I am intentionally combining the words "anger" and "treason" because the first step in addressing anger is to see the connection between anger and our relationship with God. Anger is not just an emotion that we feel; it is also a weapon that we take up in our attempt to run our lives, control undesirable circumstances, or make people do what we want.

The book of James is written for Jewish Christians who were scattered over the known world, and its main focus is how to live an authentic Christian life. Chapter one talks about our attitude in suffering, seeking wisdom instead of being double-minded, humility, and how to remain steadfast under trial. And in this context of people who are trying to figure out how to live genuine Christian lives in the midst of difficulties and problems, James talks directly about the issue of anger.

Now, to be clear, the first chapter is not just about anger, and even verses 19-26 are not just about anger. But it is mentioned, and there are things that James talks about which are directly connected to anger and how we address it. So let me show you why anger is so serious – even treasonous.

1. It is contrary to God's agenda (vv 19-20)

Verse 19 has a wisdom tone to it. James offers a point for believers to ponder as it relates to their obedience: "Let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger." In other words, those who are characterized as "doers of the word and not hearers only" (v 22) will be careful with their speech and will be cautious with the emotions of anger.

Now before we go any further, I need to identify that the text says "slow to anger" not "don't be angry." Part of the problem with anger is that it isn't black and white. It would be much easier to say that all anger is wrong, but that is simply not the case. There is such thing as righteous anger, which I would define as a controlled outrage which motivates a person to act decisively. There are things in life that should make us angry. So the problem with anger is complex in that we don't get angry over the right things and we get angry over the wrong things.

When I'm talking about anger in this context I'm referring to sinful anger. And James is saying that Christian obedience looks like a controlled life – someone who listens well, who doesn't speak brashly, and who is in control of his spirit. This is not rocket science! If you are around someone who doesn't listen to others, who constantly interrupts, who quickly gives his opinion, who tells you everything he is thinking, and who is constantly on emotional DEFCON 4, you will make an assessment about that person's maturity and spirituality. And that would be appropriate. There is a connection between anger and a lack of maturity.

So we all agree that sinful anger is bad, right? Verse 19 makes sense. But it is verse 20 that really helps us because of the word "for." That little word is important because it helps us get deeper. It tells us **why** anger is bad, and that helps us to know what kind of anger might be okay.

What follows in verse 20 is this statement: "the anger of man does not produce the righteousness that God requires." What is James saying there? He's saying that God has a goal of righteousness – that is what He wants. And human anger doesn't lead to that goal. Or let me state it very clearly: My sinful anger is incompatible with God's goals for my life. Therefore, it seems to me that every time sinful anger is in play, the real issue is whether God is going to control my life or whether I'm going to control my life.

Sinful anger, therefore, is an agenda battle. Lurking underneath anger is a struggle between God's plan and His ways and my plan and my ways. Anger tends to surface when my agenda collides with God's agenda. Since I don't have ultimate power to control things, I use anger as a means of getting what I want. Anger is a subversive attempt to take God's place.

Let me show you the connection between sinful anger and God's rule in our lives in a few other places:

"Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord."" (Romans 12:19, ESV)

I like how the NASB and the NIV render this verse. Instead of saying "leave it to the wrath of God" those translations say "leave room for the wrath of God." The idea is that there is a place for anger and wrath, but it is not mine! In other words, I'm not good enough to be this angry.

"There is only one lawgiver and judge, he who is able to save and to destroy. But who are you to judge your neighbor?" (James 4:12, ESV)

Chapter four is all about quarrels and fights. Sinful anger is certainly in view here, and it surfaces in our speech and our judgment. And verse twelve peels away the front story and gets to the back story. It reminds us that behind our sinful anger is an orientation of the heart that acts – even momentarily – as if we are God!

Just think of the last time when you were really angry – sinfully so. What were the thoughts running through your head? "I don't deserve to be treated this way!" "This is not fair." "I'm being misunderstood." "They don't really care for me." "I need to stand up for myself." And the back story really is about us and how we think life should be.

Sinful anger is really an expression of my desire to control my life. It is a battle between God's agenda and my agenda.

Do you remember being told in elementary school what to do in case your clothes ever caught on fire? "Stop, drop, and roll" was the strategy. The child is to stop so that the flames will not be fanned by movement and so others can help; drop to the ground, covering his or her face; and roll on the ground to limit oxygen to the flames. I did some research and discovered that an important value of this technique is that it gives children a memorable focal point in a situation where they might panic. It can help by cutting through the fear, panic, and irrationality that would come if a child found himself on fire.

This is what the first chapter of James can do for us in the midst of the powerful emotions of anger. Part of the problem with anger is that our emotions are so strong that we can be completely irrational, doing and saying things that we will regret later. We can gain great victory by simply recognizing that not everything that we feel is true and by remembering that anger is an agenda conflict with God.

So let me give you a simple way to remember this. When you are angry:

- **Stop** – Whatever you are doing because you are angry, stop immediately. Don't say what you are thinking, don't write the email, and don't take physical action. Stop.
- **Think** – Consider your heart; ask yourself what is really bothering you and ask what the Bible says about your feelings.
- **Seek** – Turn to God in prayer, telling Him your complaint, pouring out your heart to Him, and asking for His help.

The first step in dealing with anger is bringing spiritual rationality back into the equation by reminding ourselves that the real issue in sinful anger is having a different agenda than God.

2. It rejects the counsel of the Word (v 21)

The second reason why anger is treason is because it rejects the council and command of what God says we should do. Sinful anger and its expressions run contrary to the Scriptures. Every time

I embrace my agenda instead of God's through sinful anger, I'm willfully ignoring or disobeying what God's Word tells me to do.

After making the case that anger doesn't fit with the righteousness of God, James says:

"Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls." (James 1:21, ESV)

Now James is not only talking about anger. He is driving home a point that becomes obvious in verse 22. Namely, he wants the followers of Jesus to be doers of the word and not hearers only. But he uses anger in this context to make that point. Why does he do that? I think it is because the heart behind not listening, speaking brashly, and sinful anger are so common. In other words, one of the most common ways that we act like hearers and not doers is by listening to what the Bible says about anger and then not doing what is right.

This text is a remedy text to the problem of anger in verse 20. Anger is part of the filthiness and rampant wickedness of the world. These terms give us a picture of the sinfulness of sin (moral filth) and the extent of it (rampant wickedness). Sin, especially anger, is disgusting. Think of the last time that you "blew up" or the last time that you were "passive-aggressive" (another form of anger) with someone. Think of how awful, embarrassing, and destructive your actions were. But then consider how widespread the problem of anger can be.

James says that we are to "put away" those things and "receive with meekness the implanted word." What does that mean? It does not mean *innate*, as if every human being has God's word within them. Instead this text is referring to believers, a theme clearly stated in verse 18. The believer in Jesus has a new law written on his or her heart (Jer. 31:33) and the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit (John 14:17; 16:13). So the word of God is now written on the heart of the believer, and it is vital for his or her spiritual growth. That is what "able to save your souls" is talking about. James is not referring to an initial conversion. Rather, he is using the phrase "save your souls" as a statement about their ultimate spiritual maturity or glorification. In other words, James is saying that believers should cooperate with the implanted word because it is leading to God's spiritual plan for their lives.¹

The Bible has a great deal to say about anger, and we need to hear the word of God rather than our feelings. We need to preach these truths to our hearts:

"Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil." (Ephesians 4:26–27, ESV)

¹ For other uses of "saved" in this way, see Rom. 5:9, 10; 13:11; 1 Thes. 5:9; Phi. 2:12; 1 Tim. 4:16; 2 Tim 4:18; Heb. 9:28.

"Whoever is slow to anger has great understanding, but he who has a hasty temper exalts folly." (Proverbs 14:29, ESV)

"A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger." (Proverbs 15:1, ESV)

"Good sense makes one slow to anger, and it is his glory to overlook an offense." (Proverbs 19:11, ESV)

"A man of wrath stirs up strife, and one given to anger causes much transgression." (Proverbs 29:22, ESV)

"But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire." (Matthew 5:22, ESV)

"When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly." (1 Peter 2:23, ESV)

"Do not repay evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary, bless, for to this you were called, that you may obtain a blessing." (1 Peter 3:9, ESV)

And I could give you many more. The Bible is filled with instruction, wisdom, and commands regarding the issue of anger. When we fall into sinful anger, we are not listening to the implanted word. We are rejecting the counsel of the Word.

Therefore, when you feel angry, stop whatever you are doing and think! Stop, think, and seek. What does God's word say about this moment? What does God want me to do here? What is the right thing to do?

Sinful anger doesn't like to be asked these questions. But you will find great victory as you learn and apply the lens of God's word to your situations, circumstances, and people who tend to make you angry. Stop. Think. Seek. Don't reject the counsel of God's word.

3. It invalidates the gospel (v 26)

The final reason why anger is treason is because of what it communicates about the validity of the gospel. There is something about anger, its various species, and its expressions which detract from the legitimacy of what a person believes. In other words, if the gospel isn't able to deal with anger, then what is it really worth?

Verse 26 makes this point very clear when applying sinful anger to speech. Now I know that verse 26 doesn't have the word "anger" in it, but it is certainly implied, since not bridling the tongue springs from an angry heart.

"If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless." (James 1:26, ESV)

Don't miss the weight of these words. James is saying something very important here. A person who claims to be a Christian and yet is not able to control his or her sinful, angry tongue is deceived and his or her so-called religion isn't valid. Sinful anger is incompatible with the gospel-centered living.

That is why anger and its variant forms are listed in sections of scripture that address the kind of fruit associated with the "flesh." Two examples:

"Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God." (Galatians 5:19–21, ESV)

"Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. On account of these the wrath of God is coming. In these you too once walked, when you were living in them. But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator." (Colossians 3:5–10, ESV)

Sinful anger is as deadly as sexual immorality and is just as indicative of a heart that is incompatible with the gospel. But the problem is that we often treat anger as if it is not as destructive as sexual sin. John Piper says the following about anger in marriage:

In marriage, anger rivals lust as a killer . . . Some people have more anger than they think, because it has disguises. When willpower hinders rage, anger smolders beneath the surface, and the teeth of the soul grind with frustration. It can come out in tears that look more like hurt. But the heart has learned that this may be the only way to hurt back. It may come out as silence because we have resolved not to fight. It may show up in picky criticism and relentless correction. It may strike out at persons that have nothing to do with its origin. It will often feel warranted by the wrongness of the cause.²

The root of anger is the same as the root of sexual sin. Both are reckless attempts to get our own way. Both elevate self over God. Both treat people as if they are not important. Both create damage that lasts for years.

Anger is incompatible with gospel. It invalidates the gospel. By our actions it gives evidence that the gospel does not really work. Why is that?

² <http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/taste-see-articles/kill-anger-before-it-kills-you-or-your-marriage>

The gospel message – that Jesus came into the world to save sinners – proclaims that God has a plan for the universe and that His plan involves saving undeserving people. The gospel tells us that human beings are natural born sinners and that we deserve nothing but judgment. The gospel shatters our understanding of “fairness,” since grace through Christ is fundamentally unfair. And the gospel shapes everything that we see in life – including being treated unfairly – as part of God’s loving plan to form Christ in us.

So when something tempts me to be sinfully angry, I need to stop, think, and seek God’s help. I need to ask God to remind me of important truths that are rooted in the gospel. I need to remind myself the following truths:

- Only God is good enough to be angry
- I deserve nothing but judgment
- In Christ I have been treated far better than I’ll ever deserve
- I am called to be just like Jesus
- It is God’s place to settle all injustice
- And one day He will

So when anger comes knocking (or maybe pounding!) at your door preach the gospel to your loud-mouthed emotions. Whatever you want to do – don’t! Stop. Think carefully about your heart and what is going on in your soul. And seek God’s help for you to do what is right. Stop. Think. Seek.

And when God helps you to deal with a difficult person or situation, and when you see the victory of the gospel over disappointment, hurts, and injustices, you will know how beautiful and powerful the gospel truly is.

Anger is treason because it usurps God’s agenda for our lives, it rejects the counsel of the Word, and it invalidates the gospel.

So brothers and sisters, let us take our anger to the foot of the cross. Let us repent of our self-centered recklessness. And let us run to Jesus, who was treated more unfairly than anyone in the universe, and yet kept entrusting himself to the one who judges justly (1 Peter 2:23).

Stop. Think. Seek.