

LIVE|13: dANGERous (Part 3 of 4)

Don't Get Mad, Get Grace

James 4:1-12

Mark Vroegop

"What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions. You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. Or do you suppose it is to no purpose that the Scripture says, "He yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us"? But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble." Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you. Do not speak evil against one another, brothers. The one who speaks against a brother or judges his brother, speaks evil against the law and judges the law. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge. 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 4:1–12, ESV)

I love being a pastor. Do you know why? There are many reasons, but one of the highlights is that we get to "do life" together. The church – even a large one – is a family, and we get to cry together, groan together, struggle together, and even laugh at ourselves together.

The church is a bunch of messed up people, and there is something refreshing about working on one issue together. During this month we are working on the issue of anger, and it has already been joyfully painful to dial into this issue.

Two weeks ago I used an illustration about a time when I became frustrated with someone while driving. Thankfully my wife intervened, because I was about to get my revenge by "looking at him." And since telling that story, a number of you have sent me a picture of Kermit the Frog with an expression on his face to which many of us can relate. I've laughed every time I've seen the picture. But beyond the value of the picture, it makes me grateful to be a part of the body of Christ – a place where we can work on issues like sinful anger.

God's Word = Hope

What's more, it makes me so grateful for the treasure that we have in God's word. The Bible speaks to the real world in which we live. It has everything we need for life and godliness (2 Peter 1:3).

One of our core values is the authority of the Word, which means that we believe that the Bible is our guide for life. The Bible identifies the ultimate problem of mankind, and it specifically shows us the real world expressions of that problem. That's what we have looked at for the last two weeks. In week one we saw that anger is treason – the collision between our agenda and God's agenda. I encouraged you to stop, think, and seek when sinful anger creeps into your life. Last week Andrew helped us to see what breeds anger and what anger breeds. We learned about the various species of anger.

The last two weeks have been mostly about the negative side of anger – making us more aware of it and its potential destruction. But today and next week we hope to see what God's word says about the replacement of anger or what the Bible says about how we should deal with our anger. And I think you'll be encouraged, because the Bible not only addresses the problem of anger, but it also gives us solutions. With those solutions comes hope.

Get Grace

My thesis from James 4 is simple: **Don't get mad, get grace.** Verses 1-12 help us, in that James peels back fights, wars, and conflicts, shows us the essence of the problem, and then points us toward the solution, which is God's grace. I'm going to suggest to you that when you are tempted to be sinfully angry, there are promises from God, rooted in the gospel, that you need to believe. So anger is not just a control problem; it is actually a belief problem.

There are things that we believe when we become sinfully angry, and God's word invites us to listen to a different voice in our souls when we face situations, circumstances, and people which could make us sinfully angry.

Let me show you three aspects of dealing with anger from James 4:

1. The Issue: Unsatisfied Desires

The fourth chapter of James helps us by showing us the real issue underneath our conflicts, our fights, and our sinful anger. Now we have already talked about this over the last two weeks, so I do not want to spend a lot of time here beyond helping you to see what this text is saying. Verses 1-3 identify that underneath our sinful emotions is a desire battle:

"What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions." (James 4:1-3, ESV)

The text identifies a number of important things: 1) quarrels come from our passions, 2) problems come from frustrated desires, and 3) our motives – even in prayer – are flawed. You see, the issue is that we want what we want, and when we don't get what we want, we'll do just about anything to get what we want. In other words human beings are fundamentally self-centered, and our selfishness shows its ugliness with what we want and what we will do to get it.

Lurking underneath the surface are self-centered assumptions about life. We have expectations about how we should be treated, how things should work out, how challenging life is going to be, and what is really fair. And while it is not necessarily wrong to have dreams and desires, the tension comes when those things become ultimate. The problem is when good things become “god things.” And that is why James talks very directly about this kind of “my-agenda-living.” He calls it spiritual adultery, friendship with the world, and says that it provokes the righteous jealousy of God:

“You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. Or do you suppose it is to no purpose that the Scripture says, “He yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us?” (James 4:4–5, ESV)

In other words, sinful anger is our attempt to create a little kingdom where everything serves our desires and our passions. We have “wants,” which become “rights,” which become “law.”

My favorite illustration of this is from Paul Tripp:

Let me take you to an all-too-typical family scene. Its 10:30 at night and the children you put to bed at 9:00 are now fighting in their beds. You start down the hallway, feet heavy on the floorboards. You’re probably not saying, “Thank you, Jesus, for this wonderful opportunity, part of the work of your kingdom. I so love redemption. I love this opportunity to be part of what you are doing.” Instead you are probably saying, “They’re dead!” And you burst into your children’s room and say, “Do you know what my day’s been like? Do you have any idea what I do? I don’t ask for much – just children who are from earth. Why, I bought every shred of clothes you put on those backs of yours. I bought every morsel of food you put in those big mouths of yours. I made your Christmases happy.”

As you are ranting, do you think that your children are saying, “My this is helpful . . . here is a person of distinct wisdom . . . I am so glad that he came into my room . . . I think I’m seeing my heart”? No, your children gain little from the encounter and can’t wait until you get out of their room.

Let’s examine the emotion that is propelling you at the moment. You’re not angry because your children have broken the laws of God’s kingdom; if you were, that righteous anger would go in a very different direction. It would be the anger of grace, the anger of wisdom, the anger of instruction, and the anger of correction. No, you’re angry because your children have broken the laws of your kingdom, and in your kingdom, there shall be no parenting after 10:00.¹

I suspect that there are too many of us who can relate to this story. Our passions can easily take over. Our unsatisfied desires are the issue underneath our sinful anger. We have wants, needs, and desires, and our passion for those things can take over. That’s the issue.

¹ Paul David Tripp, “War of Words: Getting to the Heart” in John Piper and Justin Taylor, The Power of Words and the Wonder of God, (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2009), 34.

2. The Need: More Grace

So what do we really need in those moments? What does God have available to us for the gap between our desires and our wants? How do we think and live with the many unfulfilled desires that we have? The answer is found for us in verse six! "But he gives more grace."

What do I mean by grace? Very simply stated, grace is unmerited favor of God. This begins with the gospel or the Good News that God is willing to forgive our sins based upon the death of His son Jesus Christ. Grace means that God, in Christ, treats us in a way that we do not deserve and that He makes us into something we could not become on our own. God's kindness and love and mercy to us are all "grace."

But God's unmerited favor continues even after a person's conversion. Receiving Christ is the starting point of needing God's help, but God's ability to help us ("to grace us") is something we need continually throughout our lives. Grace is God's favor or help to us in conversion, but it is also His help for us in every situation that we face.

Even if you are not religious, you are probably familiar with a phrase for a prayer before a meal. You may have heard it called "saying grace." What does that mean? It is identifying that the meal is part of God's favor; it is a part of God's grace. The meal is something given to you. That is what grace is: meritless provision.

But grace extends way beyond a meal. God's grace is the means by which believers live throughout their lives. Followers of Jesus are converted by grace, but the rest of their lives they live by an unmerited, daily favor.

Let me give you a few examples:

- When Paul was struggling, he asked the Lord to deliver him from some difficulty. God's reply in 2 Corinthians 12:9 is *"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."*
- When giving money away potentially threatens your security, 2 Corinthians 9:8 offers this comfort: *"And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work."* (2 Corinthians 9:8, ESV)
- When Paul saw God at work in his life, he attributed it to the grace of God. *"But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me."* (1 Corinthians 15:10, ESV)
- When it comes to prayer, the writer of Hebrews encourages us to seek God's help, and he describes that divine assistance with the word "grace." *"Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need."* (Hebrews 4:16, ESV)

- And when Peter challenges believers to grow spiritually, he calls them to grow “in grace.” *“But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen.”* (2 Peter 3:18, ESV)

So when you put all of this together, the picture is very clear. The unmerited favor of God, where He helps you to be something that you would not be without Him, is something that believers are to seek every single day of their lives. Believers are born again by God’s grace, but they live on God’s grace for the rest of their lives.

Over my lifetime there have been a few moments when God met me so powerfully through the words of a particular author. With just a few sentences, it felt like lightening from heaven struck me. One such experience happened through a quotation from Dallas Willard in his book *The Renovation of the Heart*. With three sentences a whole new world was opened to me:

To “grow in grace” means to utilize more and more grace to live by, until everything we do is assisted by grace . . . The greatest saints are not those who need less grace, but those who consume the most grace, who indeed are most in need of grace – those who are saturated by grace in every dimension of their being. Grace to them is like breath.²

How does this connect to James 4 and anger? Let me explain. First, James 4 says that God resists the proud, but He gives grace to the humble. So there is a supply of divine empowerment available to us, but it is not given to those who are too proud to seek it. In other words, people who only pursue their passions, wants, and desires miss the opportunity to receive God’s grace.

Second, all of this connects to anger because anger is the means by which we bypass God’s grace and His agenda, and we take it upon ourselves to get our own way. We could get grace, but instead we just get mad. Instead of receiving grace, we pout and punish.

The issue is what we ultimately want. Do I want what I want so badly that I’m willing to get mad to get it? Or will I desire God’s grace more than my other wants and desires? Will I get mad, or will I get grace? Will I humbly seek God’s help, or will I arrogantly demand my own way? Will I be enraged, or frustrated, or embittered because my agenda is hindered? Or will I breathe the grace that God has available to me?

Grace to the godly is like breath. I remember sharing this concept with my wife while we were on vacation. Our twins were little enough to be in car seats but old enough to express their sinful hearts just about every time they got into the seats. Buckling them up often was a struggle – an early battle of wills. They would arch their little backs in an effort to not allow us to buckle them in their car seats. And it was crazy how difficult they could make a task that should be easy. One time when our kids were being exceptionally challenging, the kind of moment that might make a parent angry, I heard her quietly saying “grace, grace, grace.” What was she doing? Instead of getting mad, she was getting grace.

² Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, (Colorado Springs, Colorado: NavPress, 2002), 94.

She was putting into practice James 4:7-8 - *"Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded."* (James 4:7-8, ESV) She was drawing near to God, asking for God's help, and relying on God's grace. She was embracing, in an instant, James 4:10 - *"Humble yourselves before the Lord and he will exalt you."*

The heart of anger says, "I want what I want, and I will get it!" But the heart set on God's grace says, "God, I can't do this without your help!"

So the question that we have to wrestle with today is whether we live for our wants, desires, and needs or whether we live for God's grace. God is ready to give us more grace. But the problem is that often we do not want God's grace; we just want what we want.

Two weeks ago I told you that you are not good enough to be this angry. And this week I want you to see the power of getting grace instead of getting mad. Grace to the godly is like breath.

3. The Solution: Believe!

The final point this morning does not come directly from James 4, but rather from the implications of what we have talked about this morning. Remember that the reason that James calls people spiritual adulterers is because there is something that malfunctions in our soul when we give in to sinful passions through sinful anger and conflict.

The malfunction of the soul is a belief problem. In other words, sinful anger surfaces when we believe the wrong things. And anger is conquered by believing the truth of God's word. Grace comes to us through belief.

Therefore, when your wants, needs, and desires are thwarted, there are a number of truths that you need to embrace.

- **"God knows what I need"**

The first truth is the fundamental recognition that God is sovereign over everything in life. It is the belief that there is something bigger happening in my life and in the world than what I can see. Anger surfaces when we want control, and this truth simply acknowledges that we are not in control. God is. But it also affirms something more. It embraces the fact that there is nothing happening in my life which is outside of God's plan for me. Even the annoying, difficult, and challenging circumstances are not outside of God's plan for my life. This was one of the reasons that Jonathan Edwards' seventy resolutions include one regarding not getting mad at inanimate objects. God controls everything, and He knows what I need.

- **"I have a lot to learn"**

Anger does not thrive in a culture of humility. Humble people tend to not make assumptions about how life should be or to hold people emotionally hostage to their expectations. Humble

people know that they have a lot to learn, and they see life through a “graced” lens. In other words, they know what they really deserve, and they look at life from a different perspective. Unteachable people are often angry people. But it doesn’t have to be that way.

- **“God can use this in my life”**

Another truth to embrace is the simple fact that difficult and frustrating circumstances surface areas of growth and immaturity. They show us a lot of things that we don’t necessarily like about ourselves. Difficulties provide an opportunity for the loving discipline of God (Hebrews 12:7-11) and for the proving of those who are really mature (1 Corinthians 11:19). It provides an opportunity to demonstrate that you really love receiving grace more than you love getting what you want.

- **“This is not impossible”**

One of the most common lies that we believe is that we have been put in a situation that is more than what we can handle. When we feel overwhelmed, we can easily justify our sinful and angry responses. But the Bible clearly tells us that there is never a situation in life that is beyond our ability to endure. Our emotions might tell us that this is too much, but the Bible tells us otherwise:

“No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.” (1 Corinthians 10:13, ESV)

Believe the truth that God never allows circumstances that are beyond your ability to respond correctly.

- **“There is grace available”**

When we are confronted with the gap between what we want and what we have, we need to turn toward the grace that is available to us. 2 Corinthians 9:8 tells us that God is able to give us grace so that we have everything we need to abound in every good work. There is “all sufficiency in all things at all times . . .” and God is able to make that happen.

This takes great faith to believe, and it is very practical. It takes faith in God’s grace to remain in a conversation that is hard and to not just walk away or to punish people. It takes faith to believe that God has spiritual resources available to you so that you do not have to respond sinfully; you can stay in the conversation or conflict, and you can respond biblically. But you have to believe this!

It takes faith to believe that when you are really mad, frustrated, or hurt, there is spiritual power available to you which can triumph over very strong emotions. It takes faith to believe that God can help you. It takes trust in him to not blow up, to not yell, and to not say hurtful and sinful things.

It takes a great amount of faith to believe that God's grace really works better than getting what you want. But the Bible promises that God's grace is available to you.

- **"God is ready to help me"**

Finally, the Bible tells us that God is ready and willing to help us if we will seek Him and ask. Hebrews 4 tells us to come boldly to the throne of grace (prayer) that we "may find mercy and grace to help in time of need." God is ready to help us, but we need to seek His help.

Conquering sinful anger begins by saying, "God, I cannot do this on my own, but I believe that you can help me. So please help me now!" There is something powerful and transforming about seeking God this way when you are angry. A sinfully angry person is not inclined to pray because he or she is only concerned about needs and wants. A sinfully angry person just wants to be mad. Grace is not what they want.

So do you see how much faith it requires to gain victory over our anger? There are so many lies that we believe so quickly in our anger. And there are eclipsing truths in the Bible to help us see our wants and desires through the right lens.

Don't get mad, get grace. It is as simple and as hard as thinking through which bucket you are living for. Are you living for what you want, what you desire, and what you must have? Do you blow up when your path to what you want is hindered? Do you punish people with deadly silence or subtle manipulation as the means to your agenda?

The call and the hope of James 4 are the same: **"he gives more grace."**

God is able to give you grace for what you face. He's able to give you grace when someone gets in your face.

The first step toward defeating anger in our lives is relinquishing our rights to wants and needs and to affirm that you really live for God's grace.

So don't get mad. Don't live for your wants and desires. Get grace!

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