

## Be Angry

### **Ephesians 4:25-5:2**

What this adds up to, then, is this: no more lies, no more pretense. Tell your neighbor the truth. In Christ's body we're all connected to each other, after all. When you lie to others, you end up lying to yourself. Go ahead and be angry. You do well to be angry – but don't use your anger as fuel for revenge. And don't stay angry. Don't go to bed angry. Don't give the Devil that kind of foothold in your life. Did you used to make ends meet by stealing? Well, no more! Get an honest job so that you can help others who can't work. Watch the way you talk. Let nothing foul or dirty come out of your mouth. Say only what helps, each word a gift. Don't grieve God. Don't break his heart. His Holy Spirit, moving and breathing in you, is the most intimate part of your life, making you fit for himself. Don't take such a gift for granted. Make a clean break with all cutting, backbiting, profane talk. Be gentle with one another, sensitive. Forgive one another as quickly and thoroughly as God in Christ forgave you. Watch what God does, and then you do it, like children who learn proper behavior from their parents. Mostly what God does is love you. Keep company with him and learn a life of love. Observe how Christ loved us. His love was not cautious but extravagant. He didn't love in order to get something from us but to give everything of himself to us. Love like that.

I asked Alice to read our Scripture out of *The Message* translation this morning, because I really like how Eugene Peterson translates Paul's ideas. Paul can get a little dense in his writing, but this is a really great passage. Paul is giving us a list of ways to live in community with one another – particularly with other Christians.

But I have a couple other variations to share with you this morning. From Australia, we find the Laughing Bird paraphrase:

Recognising that we are all parts of the one body, let's give up all pretence. It's time to come out from behind our masks and get fair dinkum with one another. No doubt there are times when it's right to get angry, but make sure your response is right too. Justifiable anger doesn't justify vengefulness, bitterness or any other sin. And when you're angry, deal with the issues as soon as you can. Dragging it out just gives the devil a chance to get his foot in the door.

Or I've heard some people offer A Parent's Translation of this scripture: "Once you tell a lie, you'll end up having to tell a bigger lie to cover it. It's easier to remember the truth than a lie. If you can't say anything nice, don't say anything at all. Be nice to your sister. Now both of you hug and make up."

When I first sat down to work on this sermon, I really wanted to find 10 commands from Paul. Then this sermon could've contrasted Paul's 10 commandments with the 10 we get from

Moses. But alas, no matter how much I tried, I really could only find nine suggestions from Paul this morning. And I suppose I could try to preach on all of them together, or I could preach on each one for the next nine weeks. But there's one thing in there this morning that seems to stick out. Paul says, "Go ahead and be angry." How many of you knew that the Bible said it was okay to be angry?

Somehow, as Christians, we've gotten the message that we're never supposed to get mad. We're supposed to forgive everyone. We're supposed to turn the other cheek. We're supposed to be patient and peaceful. So how do we make sense of Paul this morning?

It turns out we need to remember another paraphrase this morning. From the classic TV show the Brady Bunch, we occasionally heard dad Mike Brady say, "A wise man forgets his anger before he goes to sleep." Unfortunately, life is not like the Bradys would have led us to believe. Letting go of anger is not one easy step, or something that can be completed in a half hour. But just as we all grew beyond thinking life was like our favorite sitcoms, we also need to grow past thinking that Christians don't, can't, or shouldn't get angry. The Bible is full of wonderful, faithful people who get angry.

First let's talk about Moses. Moses actually gets mad at lots of people in the Bible. First, did you know Moses got angry with Pharaoh? At first, Moses didn't think he was brave enough to approach Pharaoh. But by the 10<sup>th</sup> plague, Moses was emboldened. When he went to Pharaoh to warn him of the death of the firstborn, Exodus 11:8 says that "in hot anger Moses left Pharaoh." Once Moses was out in the wilderness with the Israelites, God provided them manna. And Moses carefully told the people God's instruction to not save any manna until morning. But of course some of them did, and then they complained in the morning when their manna was

rotten and full of worms. And the Bible says Moses was angry with them for not following directions.

Not too long later, Moses received the 10 commandments from God. But when he returned to share them with the Israelites, he found that once again they were disobeying instructions. They had created a new god for themselves – a golden calf. What do the Scriptures tell us happened next? “As soon as he came near the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, Moses’ anger burned hot, and he threw the tablets from his hands and broke them at the foot of the mountain.” We think of Moses as one of our great ancestors in faith, but clearly he got angry. And most of the time, his anger was justified, because he was angry when people ignored or blocked God’s plan.

Next let’s talk about Jonah. Jonah is but one example in a long line of prophets whose job it is to express God’s frustration. When the people stop following God, the prophets are there to remind them to get back on the path. But Jonah takes the job really personally. God sends Jonah to Ninevah, described as a city full of sin. And after initially running in the other direction, Jonah marches around Ninevah, declaring that in 40 days God will completely destroy the town. And the people of Ninevah actually listen to Jonah! They decide to change their ways; they proclaim a time of fasting and repentance. Even the king participates. And God is so moved that he decides not to destroy the city.

But Jonah is angry. He wanted to see God punish the Ninevites. But he’s so angry, he throws a childlike temper tantrum and storms off into the desert. In the desert, God tries to teach Jonah a lesson about his anger – and about how he was right to be angry with the Ninevites for leading sinful lives, but when they changed their lives, his anger should have ended.

Of course, Jonah wasn't the only one who was angry with people for their sin. Remember John the Baptist? Remember how he talked to the Pharisees? He called them a 'brood of vipers.' Them's fighting words! True, John wasn't a fan of the Pharisees being so legalistic that they weren't treating people well. But his biggest problem with the Pharisees was that they were showing up to be baptized. Shouldn't John have been happy about that? Well, John was more socially aware than he gets credit for sometimes, and he knew that the Pharisees weren't being baptized to mark their change in life. They were doing it because it had become popular. Like getting a tattoo or a pair of Crocs. And John was angry with them for making a mockery of the real faith that people were expressing.

Of course, there's no better example of how it's okay for Christians to get angry than Jesus himself. On Palm Sunday, after the parade that led Jesus into Jerusalem, he goes to the temple. And Jesus is angry and appalled to find money changers and salespeople operating there. So he turns over their tables and drives them out of the temple.

It really is okay for us to get angry. In fact, sometimes it's the best thing there is. There's a bumper sticker that reads: "If you're not angry, you're not paying attention." Essentially, it means that there are a number of bad things happening in the world. Take your pick: oppression, hunger, extreme poverty, AIDS, abuse... These are injustices in the world that should make us angry. We should be bothered that these kinds of things still occur in the world. It's our anger, frustration and general unhappiness with these and other issues that lights a fire under us and gets us to do something about it. Anger can be a great motivator for social change.

But not all of our anger is instigated by social injustice. Sometimes we get mad because someone cuts us off in traffic. Or gossips behind our back. I knew a girl once who got mad at everyone who looked at her. (She was angry a lot...) Sometimes our anger is justified, and

sometimes our anger is an overreaction or a misunderstanding. Even when your anger is unjustified, based on a misunderstanding, and completely out of place, you are allowed to feel however you feel. You are not, however, allowed to do or say whatever you want.

What exactly we do with our anger is critical. Anger doesn't give us a blank check to act out however we want. Every one of us here has seen the damage anger can do when it is released in ignorance or violence. So that's why Paul actually gives us some 'anger guidelines' in our Scripture reading this morning. Paul doesn't just say "be angry." He says not to use anger as fuel for revenge. He cautions us not to stay angry for too long – in fact, he says don't go to bed angry. Then a little later in this passage, he talks about how we use language. And he tells us not to use angry language, reminding us that how we use words can be just as violent as other, physical actions.

It seems that we have a great responsibility to manage and control our anger, and the first step to do that is to acknowledge it, name it and bring it into the light. For some of us, that means we have to admit to our anger in the first place. We need to allow ourselves to acknowledge that there are things in the world worth being angry about. For others of us, however, the opposite is true. We need to learn to control our anger, so that it isn't always leaking out or spilling over.

All of this, of course, is much easier said than done. More than one counselor, therapist or psychologist has built an entire practice around helping people learn healthy ways to express anger. And so I apologize this morning, but I don't have an answer for you. I don't have three simple steps to follow that will make you a better Christian or a better person. But I do think all of us should wrestle with Paul's words: Go ahead and be angry. But don't use your anger to hurt one another. And don't stay angry. Amen and amen.