

Proverbs
The Fool and His Anger

Sunday, May 9, 2010

Introduction

Today we are going to examine what the book of Proverbs has to say about the subject of anger.

But before we do, let me ask you a question. Is anger sinful? Is it a sin to be angry?

The answer is a very emphatic: *It depends*. In fact, this is the answer to a great many questions, and the more you think about things the more you will see this is true—it depends.

We cannot say—at least not without qualification—that anger is sinful. Why? Because the Bible tells us that God himself is angry with the wicked.

God is a righteous judge, and a God who feels indignation every day (Ps. 7:11)

You will pursue them in anger and destroy them from under your heavens, O Lord (Lam. 3:66)

My anger burns against them [Israel] (Hosea 8:5)

The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth (Rom. 1:18)

There are many other passages to the same effect. Even our Lord Jesus Christ is spoken of on occasion as being angry with the wicked.

Mark 3:1-6

Rev. 6:15-17

So if anger is always sinful, then God himself is a sinner, because he is angry with the wicked. But we know that God is not a sinner, therefore anger is not always sinful.

A note to my logic students: notice that this is a valid hypothetical syllogism. It's a denial of the consequent.

If anger is always sinful, then God is a sinner.	$p \supset q$
God is not a sinner.	$\sim q$
Therefore, anger is not always sinful.	$\sim p$

The truth of the matter is that sometimes anger is justified. Even more, sometimes it's a sin *not* to be angry. Consider an act of grave injustice, for example, like a violent crime against an innocent victim—say the murder of a child. How can you be human and not be angry? Or who would not be moved to anger by a man who beats his wife?

Who can look on such things with cold indifference? Anger is a justified response to cruelty, oppression, and injustice.

Anger is likewise a justified response toward those who blaspheme God—those who take his name in vain or make a mock of divine things. The third commandment teaches us that God will not leave such people unpunished.

Anger is *not* always sinful. But often times—perhaps even most of the time—it *is*. So what is it that makes anger sinful in some circumstances and not in others? That’s a good question! I’m glad you asked. But you tell me: What is it that makes anger sinful in some circumstances and not in others?

Anger is sinful when it is directed toward the wrong object, or when it is directed toward the right object, but in the wrong degree.

Anger is Sinful when it is Directed toward the Wrong Object

This simply means that you are angry with the wrong person or the wrong thing.

The wicked, for instance, are angry with God. They don’t like him...because he thwarts and contradicts their lusts. He commands their obedience and he threatens them with punishment if they don’t give it. He says “no” to their unrestrained behavior. And this provokes

their anger. But is it *justified* anger? No. It is never right to be angry with God. How could it be? God never does anything wrong. All his ways are just and true. One should *never* be angry with God.

Sometimes people get angry with God because things aren't going well for them, and they blame him for it. Maybe they've had a financial setback; maybe they've lost a job; or perhaps they've gotten a serious illness, or a loved one has died; and they think, "Why did God let this happen to me? It's not fair. If God really loved me, if God is such a good God, like everyone says, why doesn't he help me?" And they blame him, and find fault with him, and get angry with him.

Perhaps *you* have been tempted to think such thoughts. I hope not; but perhaps you have. I want to say, very straightforwardly, that you are not right to be angry with God. Your part is not to find fault and accuse him, but simply to trust him. Trust that he has some wise and good purpose for everything he does.

My point here is that anger is sinful when it is directed toward the wrong object; or to put it another way, when you are angry with the wrong person or thing.

The wicked are angry with God. They are also angry with the righteous. The Bible says that when the horn of the righteous is exalted, "the wicked man sees it and is angry" (Ps. 112:10). You see this today in the vehement hostility displayed in much of the media toward prominent Christian leaders. This is what was behind the

vicious personal attacks against Sarah Palin in the 2008 presidential election, for instance—and the *ongoing* attacks. Now, let me be clear. She would not have been my first choice for a VP. I think she would have benefited from a bit more seasoning, a bit more experience and depth before she was selected to run at that level, but the lack of these qualities certainly didn't warrant the unbelievably mean-spirited coverage she received. The reasons she received it is because she is a devout Christian who is not afraid to *be* a Christian and *talk* like a Christian in the public square. The horn of the righteous was being exalted, the wicked saw it and were angry.

Anger is sinful when it is directed toward the wrong object.

Anger is also Sinful when it is Directed toward the Right Object, but in the Wrong Degree

By this I mean excessive anger; anger beyond what is proper, given the nature of the offense; and especially anger that leads you into a sinful response toward those with whom you are justifiably angry.

Someone commits an injustice against you—slanders you, perhaps. You are justified in being angry with him. Someone insults you, makes fun of you, betrays you, hits you; you are justified in being angry. Someone commits a crime against you by stealing from you or injuring you. The question is, "What are you going to do with the anger?" The Bible says, "Be angry and do not sin (Ps. 4:4; Eph. 4:26). In other

words, don't allow your anger to lead you into a sinful response toward those with whom you are justifiably angry. For every offense committed against you there is a proper biblical remedy. When we demand a remedy that exceeds what God permits, then our anger is excessive. When we nurse our anger; when we feed it; and take a kind of perverted delight in it; our anger is sinful.

These are some of the things Proverbs talks about.

The Folly of a Quick Temper

The first thing we should consider is that Proverbs warns us against the dangers of being quick-tempered.

A man of quick temper acts foolishly,
and a man of evil devices is hated (14:17)

It's the first line of this couplet that we're interested in: "A man of quick temper acts foolishly."

We would do well to realize that some people by nature are more passionate than others. That is, they feel more deeply, at a more fundamental level than other people do. They have a keener emotional sense. Some of this is nature; and some of it is nurture—that is, some of it is due to the family and culture they grow up in.

A passionate nature can be a great strength, because it often serves as a motive to quick and decisive action. Think for instance of the apostle Peter...

His bold confession of faith (Matt. 16:13-16)

His rebuke of Jesus (16:21-23)

"Lord, I am ready to go with you both to prison and to death"
(Lk. 22:33)

"He began to invoke a curse on himself and to swear, 'I do not know the man' " (Matt. 26:74)

Just before this, in the garden, when the soldiers come to arrest Jesus, Peter takes out a sword and cuts off the ear of the servant of the high priest

At the tomb, after the resurrection, while John hesitates outside and is content merely to look into the tomb, Peter rushes in right past him

Every where you look, in everything he does, you see Peter acting with everything he's got; there's nothing half-hearted about him

It's these things that make him so human, and so appealing. He was a passionate man. This was his greatest strength, as well as his greatest weakness.

How is it a weakness? Oftentimes people will, under the influence of a powerful passion, say things and do things that with greater deliberation they would have thought better of, especially when the passion in question is anger. "A man of quick temper acts foolishly."

He gets angry quickly; and he speaks or acts *before he has a chance to think about what he's doing*. Passion is good, but it better be tempered with wisdom, otherwise it's going to get you into trouble.

"A man of quick temper acts foolishly."

"He who has a hasty temper exalts folly" (14:29b).

The emphasis here is not so much on the folly of the loss of temper itself, but on the *results* of losing one's temper—the consequences of being quick-tempered. "He is a man who acts on the state of his feelings not on the merits of the case."¹

Anger Ruins Relationships (Strife)

One of the consequences of being quick to anger is that it stirs up strife.

A hot-tempered man stirs up strife (15:18)

It's a difficult thing to live at peace with someone who is given to anger. There is always strife and contention and disputing. Often there is yelling. You certainly cannot deal with a problem constructively when you are dealing with a hot-tempered man. Why? Because he

¹ Chester A. McCalley, *Portraits in Proverbs* (no publication information), p. 16

loses all sense of objectivity. He's acting and reacting merely at the level of his emotions, and not according to reason.

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

He causes himself to transgress, and he often causes others to do so too, as he provokes *them* to respond in kind.

For pressing milk produces curds,
pressing the nose produces blood,
and pressing anger produces strife (30:33)

This is now the third passage in Proverbs that links anger and strife.

It seems to me that people who are given to anger, people who are quick-tempered...it's like they feel empowered. They feel energized. It's almost like a drug. It's like a psychological addiction...

Proverbs tells us that we should steer clear of those who are given to anger.

Make no friendship with a man given to anger,
nor go with a wrathful man,
lest you learn his ways
and entangle yourself in a snare (22:24-25)

A man of great wrath will pay the penalty,
for if you deliver him, you will only have to do it again
(19:19)

Proverbs also frequently contrasts the man who is hot-tempered with the man who is slow to anger.

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

A hot-tempered man stirs up strife,
but he who is slow to anger quiets contention (15:18)

Whoever is slow to anger is better than the mighty,
and he who rules his spirit than he who takes a city (16:32)

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

Anger and Self-Control

A fool gives full vent to his spirit,
but a wise man quietly holds it back (29:11)

Consider the connection between anger and the words of your mouth.

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

Whoever restrains his words has knowledge,
and he who has a cool spirit is a man of understanding
(17:27)

Let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger;
for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness that
God requires (Jas. 1:19)