

Defusing your anger

2 in The Greatest Sermon in History

Sermon for Sunday, April 11, 2010
by Bruce Fraser

Scripture: Matthew 5:21-26

The Greatest Sermon in History is the message given by Jesus Christ as recorded in Matthew 5-7. This series aims to apply Jesus' timeless truths to the situations that people face today.

1) Anger is a feeling; feelings are normal

A little girl was scowling at a bulldog. Her mother walked into the room and scolded her for being so rude. "Well, he started it!" the girl explained. That's funny. Most of the time, though, anger is no laughing matter.

Anger is a lot like fire. It doesn't take much to get it going; it grows by leaps and bounds when we feed it; and the searing flames can ruin everything around.

Anger is very common. I don't need to explain what I mean when I'm talking about feeling angry: you've been there, you know what I'm talking about. Somebody does something wrong or mean. You know the surge of adrenaline in your body as you get ready to fight back; the blood rushing to your face, turning it red; the heart pumping faster and the blood pressure going up. We all know what this feels like.

Now stop and think about what I just said:

- ◆ the surge of adrenaline
- ◆ the face turning red
- ◆ the heart pumping faster.

All of these are automatic reactions in our body. We have no control over them. Feeling angry is a normal, automatic reaction in the human body, just like any other feeling: feeling sad when someone dies, feeling happy when the sun shines, feeling afraid when danger approaches. With each of these feelings come corresponding physical changes in our bodies. Again, all of this is automatic, and we have no control over it.

2) We are responsible for what we do with anger

What we *do* have control over — and are responsible for — is how we respond to these feelings, what we do with them. When Jesus is commanding us here to not be angry, I think he is talking about how we respond, not the feeling itself:

Matthew 5:21-22, New International Version:

"You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be

subject to judgment.' But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment."

After all, what causes murder? Anger. Deal with our anger, and we won't commit murder. But that's just the beginning. Deal with our anger, and we'll feel better inside, and we'll get along better with others.

Some people let their anger control them, instead of the other way around. A woman once apologized for her frequent flare-ups by telling the preacher Billy Sunday, "Yes, I have a bad temper, but it's always over in a minute." "So is a shotgun blast!" replied Sunday. "But look at the damage it can do in just a split second!"

Some people dwell on their anger, feeding it, encouraging the fire to grow bigger and hotter, until it explodes. In that case, anger is like a bomb ticking away, ready to explode. What we need is to learn how to drown the fire, and defuse the bomb. That's why I've called this sermon "Defusing Your Anger."

3) How to defuse anger

a) Recognize the feeling

Jesus spoke plainly about anger. It's real. It happens. So when it happens to us, don't pretend that it's not there. If you're at home and you smell smoke, you look for a fire. You don't say, "Oh, it's nothing to worry about. I can handle that." When you're angry, deal with it — before the fire gets out of control.

Some people hold their anger in. They smolder and seethe inside, but deny it on the outside. Someone else comes along and asks, "Are you upset about something?" "Of course not!" they snap back. These people are among the hardest to deal with, because they're not being honest with you or themselves.

b) Don't let anger have power over you

Later on in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus gives a specific command about controlling our anger:

Matthew 5:39, New International Version:

"If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also."

That takes self-control. It's another example of not responding by reflex.

John Selwyn was a prize winning boxer, who became a missionary, spending his life building up the Church in the South Pacific. In one of the congregations was a man who was leading an immoral life, and Selwyn gave him a firm but loving rebuke. The man was outraged, and punched him violently in the face.

Selwyn merely folded his arms and humbly looked into the man's blazing eyes. With his boxing skill and powerful rippling muscles, he could easily have knocked out his attacker. Instead, he turned the other cheek and waited calmly to be hit a second time. This was too much for the man to handle, who became greatly ashamed and fled into the jungle.

Years afterward, the man surrendered his life to Jesus, and gave his testimony before the church. It was customary at that time for a new believer to choose a Christian name for himself. When asked if he wished to follow this practice, he replied without hesitation, "Yes, call me John Selwyn! He's the one who taught me what Jesus Christ is really like!"

c) Deal with anger, rather than dwelling on it

Ephesians 4:26, Today's English Version:

If you become angry, do not let your anger lead you into sin, and do not stay angry all day.

Again: it is not a sin to be angry. The sin comes in how we respond to the anger. Control the anger, rather than let it control you. Once you've calmed down (count to ten), then you can deal with the situation.

But don't stay angry. If we feed the anger by dwelling on it, getting madder and madder, then we have sinned.

Suppose you scrape your arm on something. If you wash it to get rid of germs, then leave it alone, it will look after itself and heal in a week or two. But what will happen if you keep peeling the scab off? It will never heal, and in fact may get infected. That's a picture of what happens when you mentally and emotionally keep re-living the incident that made you angry.

d) Don't jump to conclusions

James 1:19-20, New Revised Standard Version:

You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God's righteousness.

Go slow. Find out the facts, not just the gossip. Don't jump to conclusions. Put yourself in the other person's shoes. This is so obvious, it hardly needs to be said. But when people are listening to their anger, they are not thinking clearly. It's all part of the process of how we handle our anger.

e) Seek reconciliation - go immediately to the person with whom we have the dispute

Matthew 5:23-24, New Revised Standard Version:

Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother or sister; then come and offer your gift.

Go and speak directly to the person you're angry at. This is so important! Jesus gives the example of a person walking out of a worship service because they need to first go and make up with someone. The only way to get past the gossip, the misunderstanding, and the questions, is to go and see that person.

There is perhaps one time when we should wait before going to see someone: when the anger has just started, and we're boiling mad. Take some time first to cool off.

There's a story of a young man who had been cruelly insulted by a co-worker. Full of anger, he determined to go at once and demand an apology. A wise gentleman laid his hand on his shoulder and said quietly, "Son, let me give you a word of advice. An insult is like mud: it will brush off much better when it is dry! Wait until you both have cooled off, and then the thing can probably be settled quickly. If you go now, you'll quarrel even more."

Sometimes we think, "Why should I go to see her? She started this; she should come to me!" Friends, forget it. It's not worth it. Don't let our pride destroy the little that's left of a relationship.

f) Speak softly

Proverbs 15:1, New American Standard Bible:

A soft answer turns away wrath, but harsh words stir up anger.

Yes, go and see the person we're angry with. Yes, tell him or her we're angry. But don't make it even worse.

One of the most effective ways to do this is to use what counsellors call an "I statement." A "I statement" focuses on how *I* feel, rather than what *you* did.

A typical encounter goes like this:

Wife: You never pay any attention to me anymore.

Husband: What do you *mean* I don't pay any attention to you anymore? What about Saturday night? Remember Saturday night? It doesn't seem to mean a thing to you that I leave work early to take you to that theatre thing, when I've got a big lawsuit hanging over my head at work. Honestly, Helen, I don't know what it would take to make you happy. No matter what I do, you complain.

Why is he so angry in his response? Because she attacked him. We all react like that whenever someone says “You never...” or “you always....”

She could say the same message, without waving a red flag, by describing her feelings.

Wife: You know, I’m feeling lonely and neglected these days.

We can even get away with feelings of bitter anger, so long as we avoid saying, “You make me so mad when you...” Take out the “you”, and talk about how “I” feel:

Mother: Tom, I’m so mad at you I could hit the wall! I told you that I had to have the car back at 7:30 so I could get to my meeting, and here it’s almost 8:00. Boy, does that get to me! The longer you were gone, the more I boiled inside!

g) **Seek forgiveness — for ourselves as well as the person we’re angry with**

Mark 11:25, Today’s English Version:

But when you are praying, first forgive anything you may have against anyone, so that your Father in heaven will forgive your sins.

It’s clear that Jesus teaches us to forgive others, even our enemies. It’s also common sense: it would be impossible to have any kind of polite relationship — let alone friendship — with someone we feel bitter towards.

But why seek forgiveness for ourselves? Simply this: anger is a sword with a blade at both ends. We may hurt the other person with one end, but we injure ourselves just as much, if not more.

We may find that we have trouble praying, until our anger is dealt with. Jesus tells us that when we pray, the first thing we do is to forgive others. Indeed, if we don’t, then our heavenly Father will not forgive us for our sins!

I had an experience that illustrates much of what I’ve been saying so far. It happened in 1979, when I lived in the South American country of Bolivia for several months. I went there to see first hand how other people in our world live. During my spare days, I would sometimes visit people in the prison in La Paz. One day a young Canadian man named Ian asked if he could borrow \$20 from me, and he would pay me back when he got the money back from home. I gave it to him and, sure enough, next time I came in, he had the money for me. A couple of months later, he asked if he could

borrow \$50, to be paid back like before. I hesitated, but then said, “Sure, I won’t need it for a couple of months.”

Next week, when I went to visit, he said his cheque from home hadn’t come in yet. The week after that, the cheque had come in, but he had to pay up some debts. The week after, another excuse. And so on. I finally realized that I wasn’t going to get the money back, that I had been conned. When I realized that, I got mad.

I mean really angry. Now \$50 may be a lot of money, but come on — it’s not the end of the world, right? Wrong! That \$50 was the money I needed to get back to the international airport in Peru, where I had a ticket for a plane ride home to Canada. Without that \$50, I was stranded.

I didn’t just get angry. I fed my anger by dwelling on it, by feeling sorry for myself. I used to lie awake at night, imagining what I was going to do to this creep. I pictured myself grabbing him and putting his head through a wall. Mmmm, it felt good!

Suddenly I came to my senses. I said, “Bruce, you’ve never had these kind of thoughts before. What on earth has got into you?” Then, remembering the words of Jesus, I prayed and forgave Ian for the money. I cleared his debt, and as I did, I could feel my own soul becoming clear again. I trusted God that I would find a way home, somehow.

Next week, when I went in to visit, another prisoner gave me the \$50. “We’re both going to be around here for a few years,” he said. “I’ll get it back, don’t worry.” But the money no longer mattered. My soul is worth far more than a mere \$50.

h) **After it’s dealt with, let it go**

Finally, after we’ve dealt with our anger, then drop it. Leave it behind. Don’t carry any more heavy burdens than we need to. Learn from how God deals with anger:

Psalm 30:5

**For his anger lasts only a moment,
but his favor lasts a lifetime;
weeping may remain for a night,
but rejoicing comes in the morning.**

Theme for today: There is perhaps one good thing we can say about anger: it helps to burn off calories. Going fifteen minutes with a punching bag, or going for a long walk are both great ways to release the pent up anger when we’re upset.

But that's about it. There is very little else about anger which is good and healthy. In fact, many common ways of dealing with anger are the opposite: denying its presence and stuffing it down will, over the years, create serious health problems. Letting the volcano blow can destroy relationships. Let's hear what Jesus tells us about anger.