

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Unbottled

(Jesus...and your emotional life)

Warning...Anger Ahead!

(James 1; Ephesians 4)

Study #3

Introduction: Two out of three are bad...

Back in the 1960's and '70's, two coaches of very successful football programs - Darrell Royal of the Texas Longhorns and Woody Hayes of the Ohio State Buckeyes - were famous for their "don't-pass-only-run" offenses.

Evidently, Woody Hayes said it first, but Coach Royal also famously observed, "*When you throw the football, three things can happen and two of them are bad.*"¹

Today, as we continue to think about our emotional life, we're turning our attention to anger. I'm suggesting that when you or I get angry, three things can happen, and two of them are bad.

Anger can certainly result in a reception that moves the ball forward for God. Anger can even score a touchdown for good and for love and for Jesus.

But anger can also result in a massive, missed opportunity, a dropped ball. There can even be an interception where the other side gets the win.

Today, we are going to explore some of the dangers that come with the emotion of anger.

Emotions, generally...

This is the third message in this series dealing with emotions. We began with a look at worry and then Jeff helped us consider love last Sunday.

I think that these messages are important because it is important to think about our emotions. So did wise King Solomon, who wrote,
[Proverbs 4:23] Watch over your heart with all diligence, For from it flow the springs of life.

The inclinations of our hearts flow into channels that can bring the productive power of a strong river or the destruction of a South Texas flash flood, as we've seen this past week.

Each emotion we experience is unique, with unique potentials for damage or for good, for honoring God or for wreaking havoc.

For instance, anger.

Anger, in particular...

The presence of anger (and its near-cousins frustration and rage and irritation) is like a flashing light on your car's screen or dashboard. Anger is a warning signal. For most of us, that signal flashes often.

The Bible gives lots of space to anger, and that's appropriate, since anger is and always has been a big part of human experience.

All told, there are over six hundred references to anger in the sixty-six books of the Bible. Anger was very common in biblical times, and it is just as likely to well up within us today.

¹ Coach Royal attributed the saying to Coach Hayes.

When someone threatens us, we will experience fight (anger) or flight (fear). When someone actually hurts us, anger is usually not far behind.

Domestic violence occurs most often because someone got mad. And we don't call what happens on 1604 "road rage" for nothing.

Either expressed or repressed, anger is at the base of a host of psychological, physical, and spiritual problems. And all sorts of things can prompt an angry response.

When there is injustice toward a segment of the population due to race or ethnicity, we are moved to anger.

Trampling the rights of the poor, abusing the weak, and taking advantage of the homeless will all light the emotion of anger. When we see a violation of God's commands, or when we see the violation of the legitimate rights of others, anger springs to life.

If your deep passion is to go to a particular school - and you are denied, or to get THAT job - and you don't, or to win that competition - and you lose, it is perfectly normal to feel some anger.²

An increased heart rate and a red face go with the feelings of anger and are nearly unavoidable after an anger-inducing event.

The experience of the emotion of anger is, in and of itself, very often neither right nor wrong. It is simply human to experience anger when we are threatened or hurt or when our dreams are smashed.

This morning, we're putting the emotion of anger under the microscope. And here at the outset, I'll issue a triple-disclaimer.

First, I want you to know that I know that there is so much that could be said about anger that even a full series of sermons wouldn't cover all that could be said.

I will be giving two messages on this one emotion, but I'm not trying to be exhaustive. I know I'll leave a lot of great stuff unsaid and unaddressed. My hope is to be helpful.

My second disclaimer would be this: In turning to the Bible, we are exposing ourselves to God's wisdom about how to deal with anger.

Today, we'll hear crucial equipping truth because we are turning to the Bible, and the Bible is God's Word.

But that is not to say that God doesn't also use the gifts of loving friends, skillful Christian counselors, good books, or even medicines to help deal with the problems caused by anger. It is God's grace that these resources are available to us all. So, give thanks for them and use them as they are necessary.

The third disclaimer is that I don't want you to think that I think that I have conquered the anger challenge. I have not.

Nobody else has perfectly mastered anger, either. But different people find anger to be challenging in different ways.

My challenge is not so much in lashing out or blowing up. It is bottling up (so the sermon series title - "Un-Bottled" - is especially meaningful and convicting to me).

My frequent failure is that I don't acknowledge anger's presence. That failure blocks God's desire that my anger would be used powerfully and redemptively as I submit it to Jesus.

So, truth be told, I come to this topic with some insecurity due to my own shortcomings.

On the plus side, that's prompted me to pray about this message more than I have about many - and that is a good thing. Today, I'm speaking to myself as much as I am to you or to anyone else.

Now, with those prelims out of the way, on with the message.

This morning, I'm arguing for the idea that the experience of anger is unavoidable for the emotionally healthy person.

² Psychologists have long observed that blocked goals are a source of much anger.

I won't stand up here and tell you to NOT be angry, because the Bible doesn't tell us that. To tell you to not feel anger would be as unproductive as it is impossible.

Anger is a powerful emotion. Negatively, it is behind some of the greatest evils in our world. On the other hand, anger energizes some very good and righteous movements.

Because of the positive and negative effects of anger, I'm going to spend two Sundays diving into this one emotion.

I intend for the second message (July 25) to be a vision-casting message about using anger as a catalyst to something powerful and good, something for God.

On that Sunday, we'll take a look at an angry Jesus and at an angry Apostle Paul. We'll note the redemptive ways in which they used their anger.³

I hope to show how anger led to spiritual touchdowns for them and how our own anger can lead to completions and touchdowns and victories today.

In today's message, though, my aim is to warn us all that anger might be turned into an interception, a game-changer for the enemy. If we're not careful, anger will become a dropped pass, creating a massive, missed opportunity for God.

To start our study, we'll first turn to the short letter written by Jesus' half-brother, James (NOT the apostle by the same name).

³ We'll see Jesus, holy-and-wholly-without-sin, angry at the synagogue leaders who objected to Him healing a man on the sabbath day (Mark 3), His act of cleansing the temple in Jerusalem (John 2; last chapters of Matthew, Mark, and Luke) and His hard words to the religious leaders. We'll also listen as Paul describes his angry interactions with Peter and Barnabas who withdrew from the Gentile in Antioch because of fear of the Jews. (Galatians 2)

Avoid a Spiritual *incompletion* by Slowing Anger Down (James 1:19-20)

James was writing to Christians who had been forced to flee the land of Israel due to persecution and who were scattered throughout much of Asia Minor. James' letter was distributed to encourage these suffering Christians to stand firm for Jesus, despite hardship.

At verse 19 of the first chapter, James begins a new thought by referring to what he has just finished writing.

Building on What We Know (v. 19a)

[19] You know this, my beloved brothers and sisters.

So, what, exactly, do they know by verse 19 of this letter?

Well, they know that God is good, and that He can turn any suffering to good purposes. (v. 4) They know that God is so good that He gives wisdom ***[1:5] to all, generously and without reproach.***

They know that He's good enough to use life's trials to mature them and to transform them into the image of Jesus.

They also know that He is the Giver of all good gifts. He will give them the gift of Jesus' abundant life as they walk with Him now and He will give them great rewards (**v. 12 - *the crown of life***) at the *Judgment Seat of Christ* for having lived faithfully.

If you were a persecuted Christian, like James' first readers were, all of that would have been great stuff to know. It would be great to know for any of us who are suffering in any way today.

So, yes, it's a good thing that we know all of this about God's goodness and grace.

But then, right after saying, ***"You know this..."***, James turns a corner and urges them and us to LIVE in light of what we know. That's because it is possible to know something and to NOT live according to that knowledge.

It is possible that we might get a perfect score on a theology exam, answering every question about the nature and character of God correctly, and still not “ace” the acid test of life.

James would tell us another thing that we also already know.

Namely, that it is possible that we who know lots about God might be tempted not to trust God when the chips are down; that we might lash out in anger when trials hit or when our most deeply cherished dreams go up in smoke.

For that reason, right after having given great input on God’s goodness, James follows up with a warning about how to respond to the tough stuff of life.

Be Quick to Hear and Slow to Speak (v. 19)

[19] You know this, my beloved brothers and sisters. Now everyone must be quick to hear, slow to speak...

This is great advice for anyone in the middle of a bitter trial, because, at exactly those times, it is tempting to speak.

We often, instinctively, want to say something when we are in pain. James says that we will better leverage hard times for personal growth and impact for Jesus if we will first listen.

The Bible’s Exhibit A here might be the Old Testament character, Job. Job faced terrible trials.⁴

And, at first, right after the trials hit, the comments he made were short, pointed affirmations of his trust in God. At first, he did great. And for days after his trials hit, he sat silent.

Then he started talking.

Now I’m not standing in judgment of Job. I am sure that if I had gone through what he went through, I would have done far worse.

But the opening of Job’s mouth started him down a path that landed him in deep trouble. He was too quick to speak. And being too quick to speak when facing terrible challenges is a recipe for disaster.

Job said things he shouldn’t have said. So, at the end, when he was confronted by God (speaking from a tornado), Job stopped talking (**[40:4] “I lay my hand over my mouth.”**), quickly listened, and learned wisdom.

When you find yourself in a season of trials, listen to James.

Be careful in what you say. In pain, speech may come out as a bitter complaint or as an accusation against God.

Let your words be few. Speak sparingly and only after thinking. Learn to view trials, challenges, and temptations as invitations to listen.

We don’t learn much while talking. But if we are quick to hear, we will maximize the growth that hard times can bring.

Now these first two exhortations logically go together. They are logically followed up by James’ next words.

If the wise person is quick to hear and slow to speak, they will also be slow to express anger.⁵

Be Slow to Anger (vv. 19b-20)

⁵ Frederick Buechner (Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*, Harper and Row) writes, “*Of the seven deadly sins, anger is the most fun. To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll over your tongue the prospect of bitter confrontations still to come, to savor to the last toothsome morsel both the pain you are given and the pain you are going to give back; in many ways is a feast fit for a king. The chief drawback is that what you are wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton at the feast is you.*”

⁴ See Job, chapters 1 and 2.

[19b] Now everyone must be quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger; [20] for a man's anger does not bring about the righteousness of God.

James is not saying that all anger is wrong. But he does caution us to be **"slow to anger"** because a certain kind of anger - **"a man's anger"** - is a problem.

This anger, **"a man's anger"**, is the anger that surfaces during suffering. It is concerned with personal vindication and the blame game and name-calling. James says, **"Don't go there."**

Rather than fly off the handle, handle your anger. Don't let your anger control you. You, control your anger.

When we are controlled by anger (**"a man's anger"**) during a season of suffering, we get focused on payback and revenge.

As James says, such anger **"does not bring about the righteousness of God."**

It's not that anger is a bad tactic. Actually, **"a man's anger"** often "works." When we throw a fit, "hulk out", we get our way.

But it's a dropped ball in the grand scheme of things. It's an incompleteness, a missed opportunity for God.

When we lash out in anger, we stall, spiritually. We block God's vision of transforming our character. Nothing redemptive happens. Anger was thrown our way, and we dropped it.

That's what James has to say about anger. **"Be slow to anger."** The Apostle Paul also wrote about anger in the letter he sent to the church at Ephesus.

In the fourth chapter he tells us that because we are not now what we used to be, we are not to live as we used to live.

In the section beginning at verse 25, he tells us to speak the truth to each other, and always with love. We are to speak in ways that build up, not in ways that tear down.

We are to be careful to not grieve the Holy Spirit. And we are to **[4:32] be kind to one another, compassionate, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you."**

Sandwiched in the middle of these exhortations are words about anger, with a warning against our anger turning into an interception that gives a victory to our enemy.

Here's what Paul says right out of the gate.

Avoid a Spiritual interception by Mastering Anger (Ephesians 4:26-27)

Anger and Sin (v. 26a)

[26a] Be angry, and yet do not sin.

No. That is not a command to be angry. It is an assumption of anger, as in, **"You're going to be angry. Go ahead and be angry. Don't apologize for it. Don't be ashamed of it."**

This confirms what I was saying earlier. Anger is a normal, human experience. It's going to happen that we get angry. But, when anger is tossed your way, don't sin.

This is refreshing. Evidently, anger isn't always sinful. Anger doesn't necessarily lead to sin. But anger is dangerous. It opens a door.

Think back with me to the time when the brothers, Cain and Abel, offered sacrifices to God.

Genesis tells us that the Lord had no regard for Cain's sacrifice, but He accepted the sacrifice of Abel. Cain became **[4:5] very angry.**

The Lord warned Cain of the danger his anger had put him in, and said, **[6]... "Why are you angry? And why is your face gloomy?"**

[7] If you do well, will your face not be cheerful? And if you do not do well, sin is lurking at the door; and its desire is for you, but you must master it."

God wasn't telling Cain to manage sin or even to manage anger. He was to master anger. He was to control that lurking anger that was seeking to control him.

Cain didn't, though, and his anger led to the world's first murder. He killed his own brother.

The point from Genesis and from Ephesians is that if we don't master anger, it will master us. Failure to master anger opens a door to ugliness that we really don't want opened, as Paul makes clear.

The Door That Un-Mastered Anger Opens (v. 27)

[27] and do not give the devil an opportunity.

Mastering our anger in a God-pleasing way brings protection. Not doing so gives the hater of our souls an opportunity. An opportunity for what?

Well, the verse doesn't say. But it doesn't take much imagination to come up with a guess.

Satan is referred to in various places in the Bible as "***the tempter***".⁶

The tempter will see our unmastered anger, He'll recognize the spiritually compromised condition in which that lack of mastery has placed us. He will then place temptations in front of us that we will be poorly equipped to resist.

History - and my story and your story - is filled with the wreckage we have made because we were tempted to sin while angry.

While angry, we will fall for temptations to sexual sin and to substance abuse and to selfishness. If we allow our anger to master us, the devil will take our anger and tempt us to become bitter people, unbalanced people.

You and I will do things we would have never imagined doing if we don't master our anger.

The enemy will see your unmastered anger and he will tempt you to forget God and to allow your passion for God to wither and die.

He will take advantage of your anger for his own purposes.

We would never want to make things easier for the devil, but we give him an easy "***opportunity***" - an open door - if we don't deal with our anger.

We are sitting ducks for the devil's temptations to sin if we do not master our anger.

So, what path does Paul lay out for us for anger mastery? Listen.

Shutting the Door (v. 26b)

[4:26b] Do not let the sun go down on your anger.

This is the wisdom of Scripture telling us that anger does not remain innocent or morally neutral for very long. Its nature is to morph into something else - and it morphs quickly.

Here is how King Solomon said it in Proverbs:
***[Proverbs 30:33] For the churning of milk produces butter,
And pressing the nose produces blood;
So the churning of anger produces strife.***

Keep anger intact, let it run its course, hold on to it, and it'll produce a bitter harvest as surely as rubbing sandpaper on your nose will make the blood flow.

⁶ Matthew 4:3; Luke 4:13; 1 Corinthians 7:5; 1 Thessalonians 3:5

Allowed to fester, anger will become something ugly. You'll become bitter, obsessed with revenge, depressed.

So, rather than ranting and raving, or sitting and stewing (blowing up or clamming up),⁷ we are to deal with our anger quickly.

In short order, before the sun sets, before the lights go out for the night, before the eyes shut,⁸ we need to acknowledge it, grab for the fruit of the Spirit of self-control, and deal with it.

To do THAT is to catch the pass. If we don't, we will miss the pass and it will be intercepted, giving the momentum and the victory to our enemy.

Let me now wrap up with a couple of thoughts about avoiding the dropped pass and the interception when anger is tossed our way.

Conclusion:

First, and this is me speaking to me as much as I am speaking to you, be on the alert when an anger-inducing event occurs. Be "present" when someone says something harsh, does something harmful, disagrees, puts you down, makes fun, hurts someone you love.

Pay attention to the internal flashing lights and sirens that signal anger. You know them as well as I do. Heart rate goes up. Blood rushes to your face. Fists clench. Eyes narrow.

As soon as we are aware of this going on, we are to quickly acknowledge the presence of anger. Say it to yourself and say it to God: *"I am angry."*

Nothing to be ashamed of. It was an anger-inducing event. Of course, we're angry.

And we are to remain present and aware and alert. We are not to allow anger to take the driver's seat. By the Spirit's power, we are each to be in control of ourselves and our responses.

After acknowledging, we are to quickly (before the sun sets, before my next breath) pray to God. Entrusting ourselves to God is how we position ourselves to use anger for redemptive purposes. (This will be the focus of our time together on the 25th.)

Pray for the person in the express lane with eleven items, for the driver on 1604 who just cut you off, for the one who interrupted you, the one who insulted your friend.

Acknowledge anger. Pray to God.

In your prayer, forgive the one who wronged you, intercede for the one who hurt you. Tell God about your anger at a delayed flight, your sexual temptation and frustration, your stalled career path.

By acknowledging anger and by praying to God you will have turned the tables on Satan, who wanted to use the event to trip you up and get you to sin.

Instead, your anger became the trigger that prompted you to pray. Your anger has become your friend, drawing you to Jesus.

⁷ These are two of the many wrong ways to deal with anger. Ranting and raving is a strategy that almost always results in damaged relationships and rarely resolves anything. Stewing and steaming results in ulcers, and, according to verse 27, something far worse – an opportunity for the devil.

⁸ According to the Jewish way of thinking, a "day" began with the setting sun.