

8.21.22 The Way Life Should Be vs. The Way Life Is James 1.19-21
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Have you noticed how angry so many people appear to be? How are you doing with anger these days— do you find yourself feeling angry, how are you expressing it? People seem to be ruder, meaner, and angrier and a significant amount of that is fueled by social media where people feel free to say and express things they wouldn't necessarily share face to face. Yet face to face people are also ruder, angrier, and increasingly violent. People seem to hate other people they disagree with and much of the hate and anger we're witnessing is being fueled by people who claim to be Christians. This should not be so, and it greatly hinders our witness to people who are not yet followers of Christ. In the **Letter of James 1.19-21**, we have a description of **the way life should and the way life is and at the heart of it is anger.**

***“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. Therefore
rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome
with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls.”***

Anger. The word itself has an ugly, unpleasant sound. Anger is a word we associate with screaming, yelling, things being broken, abuse, violence, and murder. Anger can be loud. Or anger can cause us to seethe in silence as we allow it to fester internally as resentment until it is triggered, and we blow up. Anger produces a host of physical problems including ulcers, hypertension, and according to growing evidence anger can directly trigger heart attacks. Dr. Murray Mittleman, then director of cardiovascular epidemiology at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center in Boston, did a study (in 1995) of more than 1,600 heart attack survivors, male and female, which showed in the two-hour period after someone feels intense anger, heart attack risk more than doubles. Of all our emotions, anger is potentially the most destructive and the most dangerous. Too frequently, uncontrolled anger has tragic consequences. Anger can be a response to unmet expectations; irritation or frustration when things don't go our way; or a demonstration of hostility when someone has a different opinion. Anger can also be

a defensive response to a hurtful attack or to a real or perceived threat to one's self-esteem or well-being.

Not all anger is sinful; in fact, focused and disciplined properly anger can lead to positive action, protection, justice, or change. One form of anger is righteous indignation, the kind of anger we feel when we witness or learn of acts of injustice, wickedness, violence, or greed that harm other people. This was the anger Jesus demonstrated when he drove people out of the Temple (Matthew 21:12-16) saying, *“It is written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer’; but you are making it a den of robbers.”* We need to be careful about claiming our anger is righteous indignation because while we have Christ in us, none of us is Jesus. What we call righteous indignation about our own behavior can often be mere self-justification or trying to get our own way.

While not all anger is wrong, uncontrolled anger frequently leads to sin and all manner of evil. Think of the phrases you use to describe what happens when you're angry. *“I lost control,”* which correctly suggests that anger is something you can learn to discipline and control with God's help. *“I wasn't myself,”* of course you were yourself, you can't be anyone else. What we more likely mean is, *“I wasn't the self I want to be.”* *“I blew my top,”* or *“I went ballistic,”* convey the explosive, violent power of anger.

The Bible has a great deal to say about anger. Defusing and disarming anger so that it loses its destructive power in our lives is so difficult that **Proverbs 16:32** says, ***“One who is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and one whose temper is controlled than one who captures a city.”*** In other words, it's easier to capture a city by force than it is to overcome your own anger and temper. **Psalm 37:8** urges, ***“Refrain from anger, and forsake wrath. Do not fret – it leads only to evil.”*** **Proverbs 14:17, 29**, ***“One who is quick-tempered acts foolishly, and the schemer is hated. Whoever is slow to anger has great understanding, but one who has a hasty temper exalts folly.”*** **Proverbs 15:1**, ***“A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.”*** These scriptures and many others communicate the truth that **you are the greatest foe you face in your spiritual growth including how you handle anger.**

In today's scripture from James, **verse 19 describes The Way Life Should Be, "let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger."** This is easier said than done. The key to being quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger is that **you are not the focus, the other person is.** If your first step is to listen so that you can hear, learn, understand, and discover more about "the other," you'll be less likely to quickly get defensive or reactive or feel the need to justify or defend your own position, view, or understanding. This is true when discussing any controversial topic. If you're slow to speak and take even a little pause, a few moments, or count to ten, or take a little walk or some silence before replying to something you find difficult or challenging, you're far less likely to speak or reply in a manner you soon regret. If you're quick to listen and slow to speak, the result will be that you get angry less often and it will take more time for anger to grow. The more your focus is on Christ and others and the less it is on yourself, the easier this becomes. The more you're at the center of your universe, the harder it will be for you to do these three things.

Quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger is God's vision for human relationships. However, this isn't always the way many of us act and behave. It sounds so simple, yet how many of us grew up in a home where this was the norm? Is this the norm in your home now? How confident are you that your family and friends would describe you this way? For some of us the answer is they would. For some of us, is it possible people would be more likely to say we're slow to listen, quick to speak, and quick to anger? The first two in particular have been a struggle for me – I tend to be quick to speak which is an occupational hazard for a preacher. If I have grown in this area over the last 33 years Jill deserves a lot of the credit.

In our culture, behaviors that were once admired as the mark of a committed Christian, or a mature adult or a cultured person – being quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger, being respectful, telling the truth, not shooting off one's mouth and saying anything you're thinking whether it's wise or foolish, helps or hurts, cuts or instructs - have seemingly been replaced in too many people by uncontrolled, undisciplined, angry, lying, selfish, foolish, hateful, ignorant behavior and speech. If you want to see less of this behavior in our country, you need to stop supporting it by no longer watching and listening to media outlets and sources that peddle this garbage day after day. As

long as it's profitable, individuals and corporations will keep fostering and peddling anger and so will politicians as long as it helps them win elections. But what does all this unrestrained anger produce and lead to? James tells us.

James 1:20 portrays The Way Life Is. “Your anger does not produce God’s righteousness.” When anger gets the best of us, it reveals the worst in us. Anger can do tremendous damage to us personally, to our relationships, and to others. Christians are not exempt from this behavior. One time when our family was on vacation, we went to worship on a sweltering summer Sunday at a place that didn’t have air conditioning. During worship, a young family was seated nearby. One of the boys, who was about nine or ten, was fanning himself with an open hymnal. After a few minutes, the woman sitting in front of him, turned around and snapped, *“Do you know how annoying you are?”* Ironically, the gospel lesson that morning was from Matthew 11 where Jesus says, *“Come to me all who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest.”* Which do you think the boy will remember longer, the words of Jesus or the words of the angry woman? When people are with us, not just when we’re at church but anywhere, we want them to remember how Jesus lives in us, and not destructive anger. By destructive anger I mean everything from verbal abuse like screaming and mean-spirited criticism to physical abuse, violence, and murder.

Every day we can read accounts of people committing violent crimes because they didn’t properly handle their anger. I could have chosen countless examples just from the last two weeks and didn’t bother because there were so many.

How can you learn to disarm your anger, so you don’t do something you and others regret for as long as you live? How do you learn so you can live with grace and patience and all the fruit of the Spirit rather than allowing anger to run and ruin your life, your relationships, and your decisions? One person (David Seamands) observed that *“Anger is a divinely implanted emotion, part of God’s image in the human personality, and it is to be used for constructive purposes. **There must not be in it any malice, bitterness, resentment, or hate.**”* It’s hard for us to picture anger that isn’t entangled with those other emotions. Anger, like dynamite, must be handled very carefully and used for constructive spiritual purposes, such as overcoming injustice and combating genuine evil.

Not all anger is sinful or destructive; **the key is how we handle and deal with it.** **Ephesians 4:26-27** says, ***“Be angry but do not sin, do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil.”*** We make room for the devil when our anger is not controlled constructively but let loose destructively. Anger doesn’t have to be suppressed, but we must exercise care in how it is expressed. Too often anger is reactive and immature - *“You got me; I’m going to get you back. You hit me; I’m going to hit you back harder.”*

Psalm 139:21-24 is a good example of how to defuse anger. David vents his feelings to God in prayer, before he interacts with anyone else, and he asks the Lord to examine and search his own motives and feelings. David prayed, *“Do I not hate those who hate you, O Lord? And do I not loath those who rise up against you? I hate them with perfect hatred; I count them my enemies. Search **me**, O God, and know **my** heart; test **me** and know **my** thoughts. See if there is any hurtful way in **me**, and lead **me** in the way everlasting.”*

Because of the many trials he faced, David could have lost it numerous times. He’s not the best role model for self-control, yet to his credit more than once he had the opportunity to kill his half-crazed father-in-law King Saul who was trying to kill him, but David didn’t give in to anger. His comrades even advised David two times that God had given him the opening he needed to kill Saul, but David refused (see 1 Samuel 24:1-22 {especially verses 17-18} & 1 Samuel 26:6-12). Even with the cries of God-sanctioned holy violence in his ears, David lifted up his hands in prayer to God rather than reaching down for his sword. *“Search me, O God, and know my heart.”* David knew his own motives could not be trusted. *“Test me and know my thoughts.”* David knew that his thoughts betrayed the reality of his own weakness and sinfulness. David also wrote in **Psalm 4:4**, ***“When you are angry, do not sin; ponder it on your beds, and be silent.”*** Too many people, rather than being silent and pondering and reflecting about why they’re feeling the way they do, reach for their phone or their computer keyboard and start sharing their anger with the world. The anonymity of social media that allows people to spew hateful, angry speech without having any accountability for what they say is a profoundly serious and even deadly problem.

I'm grateful to all the people who recently helped weed and mulch the Meditation Garden. It made a substantial difference (**Photo or two**). James says you need to weed the garden of your own life, uprooting the weeds of anger, bitterness, and wickedness. Then you're to welcome the implanted word of God that has the power to save your soul. The foundational parable of Jesus is the parable of the Sower who sows the seed of the word, and it lands in four distinct kinds of soil. Some falls on the path, where the birds quickly eat it, some on rocky soil and it springs up quickly but wilts when the sun beats down, some falls among thorns that choke out the good seed, and some falls on good soil and bears fruit 30, 60, 100-fold. That's the kind of soil you want to be for God's word. Reading, studying, and memorizing God's word is one of the most effective tools you have to deliver you from undisciplined anger and to save your soul. **Remember, if it takes a small thing to make us angry, that probably says something about the size of our spirit.** Many of the scriptures I've mentioned today are worth committing to memory. If we can remember so much that is trivial, we can remember God's word that has the power to nourish and save our souls.

Anger gives the Adversary all kinds of opportunities to wreak havoc in our lives, our families, the church, and the world. But God's word can soften the hardest heart if we give it the opportunity. Many centuries ago, a wise Christian wrote, *"The nature of water is yielding, and that of stone is hard. Yet if you hang a bottle filled with water above the stone so that the water drips drop by drop, it will wear a hole in the stone. In the same way, the word of God is tender, and our hearts are hard. So, when people hear the word of God frequently, their hearts are opened to the fear of God."*

One of our highest callings is to learn to manage our emotions and to channel them into useful, purposeful, mature, godly action. In our culture we're adrift in a sea of uncontrolled and undisciplined emotions, especially anger that is leading our country into an increasingly dangerous situation. On the Web, on TV, and radio – we're deluged with thousands of angry words and images. I hope rather than sinking to the level that we see from so many people, that you'll reflect on your own temper and how you handle your anger. Perhaps Paul says it best in **Romans 12:17-21**, *"Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved never avenge yourselves, but leave*

room for the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." No, "if your enemies are hungry, fed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

Prayer: Merciful God, thank you for loving me even when I'm angry. I realize that cultivating anger damages my relationship with you and others and even myself. Thank you for forgiving me and giving me the freedom to forgive those who hurt me. Enable me to cope with situations that stimulate anger in me through your calm Spirit dwelling within me. Help me believe that if I am a new creation in Christ then I am no longer a slave to anger. Christ controls me and I yield my anger to him. Refresh me with your love and help me to walk by your Spirit each day and in every encounter I have so that I may be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Questions for Discussion or Reflection

1. What is your response to this statement: *"One of our highest callings is to learn to manage our emotions and to channel them into useful, purposeful, and reasonable action."* Why is it so important to learn how to manage our emotions?
2. What are some ways that anger may lead to some positive action?
3. James 1:19 describes The Way Life Should Be, *"let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger."* Quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger is God's vision for human relationships. Which of these three behaviors is your strongest? Which do you need to work on the most?
4. James 1:20 portrays The Way Life Is. *"Our anger does not produce God's righteousness."* When anger gets the best of us, it reveals the worst in us. In what ways can anger do tremendous damage to us personally, to our relationships, and to others?
5. Ephesians 4:26-27 says, *"Be angry but do not sin, do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil."* What steps can you take to keep short emotional accounts and to handle anger appropriately, so you don't give the Adversary the opportunity to wreak havoc in your life?
6. What do you think we can do as individuals and collectively to try and mitigate or calm the anger that seems to be so prevalent in our culture?