



Poland Presbyterian Church

At the Green since 1802

2 Poland Manor  
Poland, Ohio 44514  
330-757-1547

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A Sermon by Brent J. Eelman

### The Costs of Anger

#### James 1: 17 - 27

*Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. 18 In fulfillment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures.*

*19 You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; 20 for your anger does not produce God's righteousness. 21 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.*

*22 But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. 23 For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves\* in a mirror; 24 for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. 25 But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act—they will be blessed in their doing.*

*26 If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. 27 Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.*

An "anger venting club" was begun ten years ago in the Shenyang, China. The idea behind the club was to provide its members with a legitimate place where they can vent their anger. At the club they can hit models of people, smash pots and pans, and scream and shout. Today we often grouse about all the imports from China. Can we expect something like this? There certainly is a market for it and consequently anger venting clubs are appearing in Beuno Aires, Budapest, and Dallas, TX.

We live in an angry society. There is a rage that burns under the surface of many lives and this rage is not without its consequences. This past week human anger and rage erupted with the mass murders in Orlando. All types of motivations have been attributed to the killer of 49 people at a nightclub: Jihadist anger directed toward the west, anger directed toward homosexuality, anger with women, self-loathing anger at himself. But every commentator, pundit and analyst agrees, the perpetrator was angry, very angry.... And others paid the price. But we all get angry... Don't we?

The book of James contains this admonition: "let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God's righteousness." Anger, from a biblical perspective, is a destructive force. Throughout the bible, there is a universal warning to human beings about becoming angry. Even the proscription from Ephesians 4: "Be angry but do not sin" implies that anger has a way of controlling our lives and is destructive.

This morning I would like to examine two things: First, the hidden costs of anger. Then I will look at James'

advice because I believe it provides a foundation for a healthy Christian life in our contemporary age of rage.

## I

Orlando has reminded us of the costs of anger. Anger creates victims. But often we do not consider the costs to the one who is angry: the person who doesn't go on the shooting and destructive rampage; the person who just lives with a simmering internal rage. (All of us are that person some time or another.) The price is high. The physical costs of anger include:

- a shortened life.
- raised blood pressure, often to dangerously high levels.
- headaches,
- ulcers,
- bowel problems,
- respiratory ills,
- skin flare-ups,
- lowered immunity to colds and other viruses,
- a constant feeling of tiredness and exhaustion, and
- heart attacks.

Anger causes people to seek comfort in potentially unhealthy addictive behaviors including:

- binging on junk foods,
- drinking too much alcohol,
- smoking,
- drug use and
- of course, the couch potato syndrome.

There are also social implications for the angry person. Anger will disrupt and destroy relationships. People do not like being around an angry person and consequently people who are chronically angry become isolated. They may have acquaintances, but few, if any friends. Colleagues and others at work will isolate the angry individual. People do not want to be hurt or verbally assaulted by someone who becomes easily angered. Employees who cannot control their anger or who have a "low boiling point" create a workplace that is filled with confrontations and sour work relationships. One angry episode has a way of destroying a dozen constructive contributions.

Finally, there are the spiritual costs of anger. Studies have shown that anger reduces creativity. Anger, directed at a problem or individual, has a way of hyper focusing on the cause of the anger and seldom seeks a solution. It also produces "binary thinking", or black/white reasoning. The angry person always believes that he or she is right....always. This type of thinking leads to depression, melancholia, and isolation. There is a spiritual cost to anger because we were created to live with others and anger destroys relationships.

But perhaps, most importantly, anger is absolutely graceless. The gospel proclaims the grace of God. Anger is the antithesis of that proclamation, and that is why it is a problem.

## II

What to do with anger? Two conventional ideas that we often hear are garbage. The first is "stuff it". It doesn't work. Anger has a way of leaking out and often it becomes directed at innocent parties. It doesn't work. The other is "Vent your anger." We hear people say, "you should vent your anger." Studies on venting anger, however, reveal just the opposite. Venting anger usually produces more anger. The person who vents his or her

anger by physically beating on a pillow is more likely to beat on another person. The person who verbally vents his or her anger, usually experiences a rise in anger rather than a dissipation. Those who "vent" their anger are also more likely to act aggressively.

### III

There has to be a better way and that is what James suggests. There are three components to his advice. 1. Be quick to listen. 2. Be slow to speak. 3. Be slow to anger.

**Be quick to listen.** One needs to listen for two things. First, listen to what is making you angry. Listen! Don't merely hear, listen. Listening is active and it means putting yourselves in another's situation and appreciating and understanding it. It means pondering and understanding not only what they are saying that is angering you, but the context from which they are speaking or behaving. "Be quick to listen." It is good practical advice. We hear a lot of things, but we listen so very little.

We also need to listen to ourselves. We need to listen to our own inner talk and what messages we are giving ourselves that make us feel and respond the way we do. Anger comes from within, even though we usually blame it on someone or something external. We need to listen to our bodies when they tense up and when our neck and face begin flush. What is our anger saying? Be quick to listen!

**Be slow to speak.** Anger is a reptilian response. Like a snake, it lashes out to protect itself, instinctually, without reflection. *Be slow to speak* tempers that reptilian response that verbally bites the head off of someone. *Be slow to speak...* is also related to the first because few of us can speak and genuinely listen. Curb your tongue. Our words often escalate the situation and if we just spend a few seconds, reflecting before we speak, much pain can be averted. Reflect on why you're reacting out of anger.

**Finally, be slow to anger.** Rewrite the narrative. We get angry, really angry, because we interpret some action or behavior of others. Road rage is the classic example. We get mad at the person who speeds by us and cuts us off or hits the brakes right in front of us. We create a story, "They are stupid and they did that to me." This might or might not be true. We choose to believe it is true. Rewrite the script. The person speeding by you and cuts in front of you on route 80 did so because his wife is in the back seat in labor and he is rushing to get to the hospital! Choose to believe a different script. The action doesn't change, but your reaction will.

Anger and rage characterize our world, but there is a better way: the grace of Christ. Grace is the unconditional acceptance of the other as a person who is loved by God. Grace is the acceptance of life's situations, recognizing that they are a given, but that our responses are not. Grace is the ability to forgive and to move on constructively. As I mentioned before, anger is the antithesis of Grace and thus it is the antithesis of Christ's gospel.

There is one important discovery that I have made in my own life regarding anger and that is prayer. Christ and Paul exhort us to pray for those who anger and hurt us.... Prayer is the best way I know to let go of anger in a positive and healthy way. When I am angry and that anger is directed at a person or group.. I pray. My prayer is not: "God please make them more like me so that they don't anger me" no.. My prayer is for them as persons who are loved by God: persons whom I have failed by not loving; persons, who, if I take the gospel seriously, are brothers and sisters to me.

I have discovered that to pray for someone requires me to listen to them, to myself, and to God...

I suspect that someone could make a fortune in our society by starting "anger venting clubs." That is a sad

commentary on us... But there is a better way... and James invites us to avoid the expensive costs of anger... and live the life of gracious freedom. This is the good news. Amen.