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Don't Let the Sun Go Down ...
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Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil (Ephesians 4:26).

Anger is our natural response to frustrated desire. We want something and we don't get it, so we get mad instead.

We see that dynamic most clearly in two-year-olds, which is why we call that age the Terrible Twos. A young child wants something—a toy, a treat, more time to play—and Mom or Dad says no, then the child sobs or screams, ratcheting up the rage and the pressure on his parents to change their minds. Children who routinely get their way by doing that learn to be manipulative, and maybe even narcissistic, imagining that other people exist mainly to satisfy their desires. On the other hand, children whose parents discover the art of firm but gentle discipline grow up to be more thoughtful, learning the life-long practice of self-control.

The Twos can be terrible because two-year-olds have no filter. They just let fly with whatever they're feeling. Truth be told, some people never do develop much of a filter. They may turn into bullies if they find that other people bend to their anger: girlfriends who think they can fix them, for example, or employees who have no choice but to yield to the boss's wrath. People who believe that rage gives them power have little incentive to curb their anger, and they can do a lot of damage. That's one reason why it's so important to teach children how to cope more constructively with frustration, and not to reward bad behavior by giving in to their tantrums.

Most of us, as we get older, learn to be more subtle in dealing with anger. We still face all sorts of frustrations in life, but we look for other ways to direct our anger.

Some people turn most of their anger inward. They keep it all bottled up inside and never find helpful ways to let it go, maybe because they want to avoid the conflict that comes from expressing anger. People who do that habitually tend to become depressed. They might not even be able to say why they're depressed, because it isn't about anything in particular. It may just be the general result of keeping all that anger locked up inside with nowhere else to go.

Depression is just one way that anger can be destructive. People who are chronically angry tend to develop all sorts of health problems: high blood pressure, heart disease, gastric troubles, muscle tension, and others. Beyond the physical symptoms, chronic anger hurts people spiritually too. It robs us of joy and peace. It keeps us turned inward, unable to focus on loving God and other people, which Jesus says is the whole purpose of living.

Anger also threatens to destroy relationships, since it distorts the way we see other people and the world in general. Most people don't want to be around grumpy individuals, so anger isolates those who get stuck in it and makes them all the angrier. And chronic, pervasive anger takes a toll on society as a whole, especially in a democracy. Angry people aren't much interested in cooperating with those who see things differently. They insist on their own way, so that public needs go unaddressed and civic virtues give way to a kind of smoldering social hostility.

Anger, like fear, seems to be trending, as they say in social media. In fact, anger and fear are often related. Fear prompts the famous impulse to fight, flee, or freeze, and if you're going to fight, it helps to be angry. Anger energizes. It feels active and assertive, as opposed to the passive helplessness of fear. No wonder fear metabolizes so easily

into anger. And insofar as people are afraid of all sorts of things these days, it's no surprise that there's so much anger in the world around us.

Anger is not all bad, of course. It can be a useful thing, which is why the impulse comes so naturally to us. Anger gets the adrenaline going and mobilizes the body in response to threats. And if we see anyone suffering from injustice, a legitimate anger may motivate us to make things right. Victims of abuse ought to be angry enough to do something about it, and prophetic anger over unjust suffering can lead whole societies to change for the better, as the best of our prophets have always shown us.

Anger is a useful thing if it drives people to do what's right, then goes away when its work is done. That's why the letter to the Ephesians says, "Be angry but do not sin." Anger slides into sin when it becomes excessive and destructive, or when it keeps souls and societies churning for no good purpose.

It's striking that, in the Sermon on the Mount, just after Jesus gives us the Beatitudes and describes what a blessed life might be like, he turns to talking about some destructive habits of the heart, and he begins with excessive anger. He's not talking about legitimate, short-term anger that serves some useful purpose. Jesus himself was angry, for example, when he saw traders in the temple turning his Father's house into a den of thieves. But the cold, condemning anger of self-righteousness or the hot-blooded rage that leads to violence, Jesus says, can subject the soul to judgment as surely as the act of murder itself.

We all know that we human beings don't think straight when we're angry. It's telling that we use the same word

“mad” to mean both angry and insane. Our language gives us clues to the way the world works, and to the dynamics of our own hearts. We get carried away when we’re angry, and we say and do things we regret later on. Then we have to apologize and make amends. “I’m sorry,” we say. “I didn’t mean it. I was just so mad.”

If anger is a natural response to frustrated desire, then from a Christian perspective the solution to anger is to want the right things and learn to manage our frustration when we can’t have what we want. That’s easier said than done, of course. Even when we want only good things in life—health, companionship, a decent job, security, even peace and justice in the world—we don’t always get what we want. Then what do we do?

Some people just become stuck in their anger. They get mad at others who they think let them down. They get mad at themselves, and beat themselves up for what they see as their own failures. And even if they won’t admit it, they get mad at God, who they think is unfair when they don’t receive the blessings they deserve, especially when they look around and see other people enjoying those things.

But it’s not healthy to stay stuck in our anger. It’s unhealthy for the body, unhealthy for the soul, unhealthy for our relationships (including our relationship with God), and unhealthy for society as a whole. Our challenge then is to develop habits of the heart that will help us let go of destructive anger and redirect what’s left in more productive ways.

One such habit of the heart is forgiveness. When people let us down, or when we think we’ve failed ourselves,

we need to learn to forgive, and let go of our grievances. It does no one any good to harbor bitterness or resentment. Those attitudes just rob us of joy and peace and the energy we need to thrive and do good things in this world.

Another habit we need to practice is patience—patience with ourselves, with one another, and even with God. Patience is a virtue we'd just as soon not need. We'd much rather have the thing we want, instead of the patience to go without it. But patience is good for the soul, not least because it's a kind of practice in humility. It frees us from captivity to the tyranny of our desires, and a freedom that profound is a very precious thing.

And we also need to practice compassion, for ourselves and for others. Compassion lets us separate the sinner from the sin. It enables us to see all human beings, including ourselves, as flawed and imperfect, but nevertheless as children of the heavenly Father, made in the image of God. A compassionate heart learns to love sinners, while working to free ourselves and others from the sins and shortcomings that bind us all.



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