

What the Bible Teaches About Anger and Forgiveness

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Ephesians 4:26-27

You know, a correct and biblical view of anger and forgiveness are absolutely essential for the proper functioning of all our relationships. For real unity, we need to understand these words. And yet, I don't know if there are two words that cause more problems for us than these words, "anger" and "forgiveness."

In virtually every counseling appointment that anyone ever does, what you will find is that the person who is struggling with a relational problem at some point has misunderstood what the Bible teaches about anger and what the Bible teaches about forgiveness.

Every time I read one of the advice columns, I am going to talk about this in a moment, but 80% of the letters to "Dear Abby" or to "Ann Landers" could be taken care of by a simple, biblical discussion of anger and forgiveness. There is so much confusion regarding these two words that Satan gains a tremendous advantage in our lives, in churches, in families, in relationships at work, between siblings and between husbands and wives. If we could just be clear and gain truth about anger and forgiveness, so many of the problems that we have relationally and emotionally internally would be resolved. But Satan has thrown so much confusion into the mix and we ourselves have received bad teaching about these two words, anger and forgiveness, and such bad modeling, that we are unable to express either anger or forgiveness in a biblical way.

Regarding anger, some of us have received the message by both modeling and through explicit teaching that we must never be angry and certainly never acknowledge our hurt or anger if we are Christians. There is a significant percentage of people in the church and in the larger society who grew up in homes where you were never permitted to ever be angry. That any expression of displeasure was met by immediate correction. All emotions were buried, swept under the rug. Mother and Father never showed anger. There was a continual hostility, a low-level cold-war, a resentment that might have been so thick that you could cut the air with a knife—but you were never allowed to express anger. Or admit that anything ever hurt you.

Some of us have adopted the notion (not only from our modeling) but somehow being a Christian means being a nice person all of the time. Christianity plus unity equals niceness. And we are going to destroy that notion pretty quickly. Niceness is a temperamental trait. My golden retriever, Sandy, is nice. But my dog, Sandy, is not necessarily a Christian. I don't know, though, we really haven't talked about that. I guess I have been a little lax in witnessing to my dog. Niceness, being like Melanie in "Gone With the Wind"—you know, one of those people who never gets upset—ever; that is not the same thing necessarily as being a Christian.

We have all kinds of confused ideas regarding anger and the permission or lack thereof from God for us to be angry. And then how we express anger is a

problem because while some of us grew up in homes that modeled a lack of an expression of anger, others of us grew up in homes where one or both of our parents were both regularly blowing up, where rage reigned. The father or mother were completely out of control and regularly losing their tempers. You may have been struck. You may have been cursed. You may have watched your mother be struck or cursed or your sister or brother struck or cursed. And the volatility and the general level of upset in your home has caused you to really call into question whether anger could ever be right or anger could ever be expressed since it was always so wrong in the home you grew up in.

And just as there is a problem understanding anger correctly, there is equally as large a problem in understanding forgiveness. I have seen so many wrong-headed ideas and practices regarding forgiving people who have offended us. There is this idea that to forgive someone means that you were never hurt or that what somebody did wasn't wrong. Nothing happened. Let's just play pretend and move on. Or I repress my feelings. Of course, I forgive you. I didn't feel anything anyway.

Or I forgive out of my words and out of my brain, but not out of my heart. I isolate my heart off. My heart is all tied up in knots because emotionally I am really wounded and hurt, but I am supposed to forgive so I better verbalize that immediately. "Oh, I forgive you." And rationally I know that is right so that I will to forgive you, but my emotions are not released.

There is so much confusion regarding forgiveness. So what I would like to do today is to give you some very straight-forward teaching regarding what the Bible actually teaches about anger and forgiveness. We are going to set this in the context of this conference's theme of unity. What the Bible teaches about anger and forgiveness—let's pray.

Let's take a look then at Ephesians 4:26-27. This is where we are going to start, Ephesians 4:26-27, the scripture says:

"In your anger, do not sin. Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry and do not give the devil a foothold."

Now, the New International Version is a little weak in that first phrase, "In your anger, do not sin..." The Greek is a little stronger. It could be better translated, "Be angry", but it is really not quite that either. Paul is using what we might call a permissive imperative. What he is saying is that you have divine permission, not a command, but you have divine permission to be angry. But make sure that you don't sin with this permission.

This is a classic text; one of the clearest that we can find that would distinguish for us righteous and unrighteous anger. There is a clear recognition that at least some anger that we have is affirmed by God as being all right. Be angry. God gives you permission, Paul is saying, to be angry. You have God's divine approval, his affirmation and his blessing.

So, what Paul is saying first of all is that there is such a thing as righteous anger and, yet, God also sets limits around this divine approval and he says that you can overstep my permission and slide into unrighteous anger. You need to be careful not to sin and he sets limits.

But let's first look at the permissive prescription, "Be angry," God's divine approval, what we might call righteous anger. And then we will talk about the limits on this and when we might be stepping into unrighteous anger. Recall that this is in a letter that has the highest view of church and unity.

Regarding righteous anger, first of all, we might say that anger is really simply a reflection of God's divine image in a human being. It is God who wired us to feel anger. And what an incredible thought that is especially for those of you who have been taught, either through explicit teaching or through modeling, that there is something wrong with all of your anger. I want you to hear this very clearly that the capacity for anger, the call for righteous anger, your wiring regarding anger was put in you by God and is part of God's divine reflection, part of his image, in your very being. If you had no capacity for anger, then to that extent, you would not be reflecting the image of God.

It is an absolute lie that if you became more Christ-like, if you were more like Jesus, then you would never become angry. In fact, what do we find as we look at the real person of Jesus in the New Testament, not this made-up image of Jesus in the movie versions or in the paintings, where he is always meek and mild? What do we find of the real Jesus walking through the gospels?

What we find is that other than compassion, one of the most often expressed emotions by Jesus Christ is anger. Contrary to the easy-going, laid back Jesus Christ of the 90's, we see Jesus in John 2 putting together a whip out of cords, driving the money-changers out of the temple. To those who sold doves in the temple, he cried out, "Get out of here. How dare you turn my Father's house into a market-place!" His disciples at that time remember the Old Testament scripture that said, "Zeal for your house will consume me."

He was angry on God's behalf at people who turned worship into a money-making venture. What do you think Jesus would think today about those who market Christianity for the sake of personal profit? What do you think Jesus would say to those who manipulate people's emotions, who use guilt to take up two, three and four offerings in a service? What do you think Jesus would think? How do you think Jesus would feel and what do you think Jesus would do if he were here in the flesh and examined the financial practices of certain religious organizations? How dare you turn my Father's house, which is meant to be a house of worship, a house of prayer, a house where people can get in touch with God and find refuge, a house where people can freely come into the presence of God and be safe, how dare you turn it into a business and sell religion?

Jesus Christ was angered by the greed of certain religious leaders in his day. And he was angered by religious leaders' lack of compassion for those who are sick; for those who are in sin. It says in Mark 3:5 that he looked at the Pharisees in anger and was deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts.

It makes Jesus angry when we shun the sick. It makes Jesus angry when we blame the weak and the sick for being weak or sick. When we refuse to pray for them or to see people in need as a bother. And we all do that.

It makes Jesus angry when we show the amount of partiality that we do to the healthy and the wealthy and the educated, and we turn our backs on the least,

the last, and the lost. That angers the Lord Jesus Christ, who is always moved with pity for those in need.

Death angers the Lord Jesus. We read that in John 11. It is completely false that niceness, pleasantness, even-temperedness is the same thing as being a Christian. My golden retriever, Sandy, is nice. To my knowledge, she is not necessarily a Christian. Christianity, as embodied by the Lord Jesus himself, involves this large component of righteous anger. And certainly, God the Father, who is perfectly holy and righteous in every way it is said in a whole variety of passages, not just in the Old Testament—you know, the so-called angry God of the Old Testament and the kind God of the New Testament. When people make that kind of distinction, we know that they know nothing about the Bible and haven't read it. Because the New Testament speaks a great deal about the anger of God, the wrath of God.

If you want to read something of the wrath of God, just read the last book in the New Testament, the book of Revelation, which speaks of God treading down the wine press of his wrath. In the Civil War they used to sing that—“Glory, glory, halleluiah....who has trampled down the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored. Who has loosed the fateful lightning of His terrible swift sword.”

This is a part, by no means the whole, but a part of the picture of God in the New Testament. Romans 1:18, the wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who by their wickedness suppress the truth.

I get into all of this just to underline for all of us the biblical notion that it is entirely appropriate and right for us to feel anger at certain times over certain things. It is part of God's image in us. Now let me ask you a question. What is the purpose of anger? Why should you be angry about anything? Why does God get angry and why should we, little image-bearers of God, get angry?

Anger is God's way of setting limits. I would call anger a boundary emotion. It is God's way of drawing the line and saying, “This far and no farther. Enough. Stop it.” And people who can't get angry are people who don't understand anything about boundaries. There is a great deal being written about boundaries today and people's allowance of violation of their boundaries—either their bodily boundaries, their emotional boundaries, their relational boundaries. Really, most of that literature could be summed up in a proper understanding of anger. People who can't get angry are people who have poorly defined boundaries. They are folks who can always be taken advantage of. People who can't get angry are people who are always victimized. People who can't get angry are people who can be walked upon and stepped on by the ruthless and the vicious. They are people who can be used. They have no capacity to say, “Enough. No. This far and no further.”

You read “Dear Abby”, as I mentioned before, and there is always a letter in there by someone who says, “You know, my brother-in-law has been living with us for five years. He never brings any money into the house. He eats all the food in our refrigerator. He brings women into the house at all hours of the night. He doesn't work. He drinks two six-packs of beer a day. We don't know what to do. His behavior doesn't seem right. What should we do?”

How about getting angry? How about putting a limit on your brother-in-law and say, "Look, you need to get out of our house by such and such a date. You need to find a job. You need to get responsible." How about saying to your brother-in-law, "Enough. Stop it."

The same thing applies to parents who find themselves unable to stare down a defiant or rebellious child. They need to confront a rebellious adolescent, stare down and be tough with a rebellious teenager. They need to draw a line and say, "Enough. I will not put up with disrespectful talk. Enough. Here is the line. I will not be cursed."

The same thing applies in churches where pastors or leaders regularly and consistently overstep the lines of their authority and abuse or devour their sheep – steal their money, have sex with one of their counselors, or is on a total power trip – someone must stand up and say "Stop it. Enough."

Anger is one of those limiting emotions. It is a boundary emotion in which we are saying somebody has stepped over the line of sin.

And one of the great tragedies of the modern world is that we have lost our ability to get angry. Let me put it this way. Satan has made a concerted effort in the modern world to progressively destroy the image of God in us. It reminds me of someone who would take a beautiful portrait and tear it up with an ice pick. As we were created, we were like that beautiful portrait. And because Satan hates everything about God and resents every picture of God in the universe, what he has been doing over the ages is taking an ice pick and just ripping at the image of God in human beings. All that reflects God in us, he wants to wound and destroy.

But in the modern world, one of the things that Satan has almost obliterated in us as part of God's image is the capacity to feel anger. Part of the way that he has done this is by destroying the notion of any boundaries or standards. He has made modern men and women so insecure regarding the setting of any standards, the declaring of any absolutes, the drawing of any lines, that many people including many Christians feel that they are insecure about saying, "No. Stop it. Enough. This is wrong."

We would find it almost impossible to come up with the emotion that Jesus did when he drove the money-changers out of the temple and said, "Zeal for your house consumes me." Being consumed like that? How dare we? Who do we think we are? See, we have lost our security that we even know what the standards are.

Alan Bloom, in his well-known work "The Closing of the American Mind", opens with an observation of university students that he is teaching. He says that modern students, as they flow into the university, are certain about nothing other than this: that there are no absolutes. There is only one absolute in the mind of the university student—that there are no absolutes.

And so now, imagine a parent who is trying to draw lines when every single line they can think of is a dotted line. Every single line is a wavy line and a broken line. How can you set any boundaries on anyone and any thing if you are unsure of the standards, when everything is relativized?

We have lost our ability to feel anger. And what I see in men and women in the 90's is an extraordinary dullness in our emotions. The tragedy of living in the modern world is that we are unable to feel almost anything. The worst kinds of things go on all around us. We are bombarded by stories that would shock our mothers and fathers, much less our grandparents, and yet we baby-boomers and baby-busters just sort of shrug our shoulders and say, "Oh well. C'est la vie. Football heroes cut their wives' throats – what else is on TV? Maybe we can get a picture of us standing in front of his house."

Pure white anger, the ability to say, "This is wrong. This is wicked. This is evil."

You know, the Bible speaks of a time in history when people lost their ability to feel. When the Lord speaks to the nation of Israel in the Old Testament in the book of Jeremiah, he says, "My people have lost their capacity to blush." Jeremiah 8:12. He is not speaking of anger there, but a similar tragic loss of feeling. "My people have lost their ability to blush."

I read that the other day and I thought, "Boy, you talk about life in the 90's." Is there anyone anymore who blushes?

We can talk so openly and freely about so many things. We are continually urged to more and more openness. My people have lost the capacity to blush. The Lord could just have said, "My people have lost the capacity to feel anger."

Let me share with you a few times that I have seen this played out in all of its tragic consequences. I have seen this play out as husbands and wives have tolerated infidelity on the part of their spouses. It is an awful thing, a tragic thing, when a husband or a wife can't reach inside with jealous anger and say, "Enough. I am your wife. I am your husband. I will not be treated like a dishrag. You may not run around on me."

I have seen this tragic loss of anger in parents with their teenagers, and parents with their young children. That disrespect goes completely unchecked. There is no capacity to feel tough love. I have seen adults endure continual, unending verbal abuse from their parents and from people in authority and just roll over and take it! I have seen churches put up with the most insane forms of pastoral abuse – folks being literally cursed from the pulpit and they say, "Well, he is a good teacher." Or putting up with horrible sin in their midst without discipline, without confrontation and everyone says, "Who are we to judge?"

Do you understand that anger is really the flip side of love? Psalm 97:10 says: "You that love the Lord hate evil."

The more deeply you love someone, the more deeply you are going to feel anger when they step over the boundary of God's Word and purpose. You know, when you don't care about folks, you don't really care about what happens to them. But when you love, as God loves, and you wish to reflect the image of God in a pure way, one of the emotions that will come alive is the ability to feel clean anger, to watch things on television that are perverse and say, "This really makes me angry." To see a lack of compassion in your own heart and say, "This makes me angry." To see a lack of compassion in the church and say, "This is wrong."

And to not use words to mask anger and say, "My spirit is grieved." Christianese. "I am burdened. I am not angry; I am frustrated. I am disappointed." How about, "I am angry."

So, anger is part of that image of God in us when we or someone else is abused, when we are punched or slapped or cursed, emotionally battered, when we experience deceit, when we are lied to, when we are manipulated, when someone is not telling us the truth, when God's righteous standards are just stepped on and pushed aside, then the boundary to say, "Stop it. Enough" is anger.

But Paul goes on to say that we need to be careful because anger, like everything else in us, is fallen. Because you are permitted to feel anger, go ahead and be angry. But the limits on anger are first of all, "Do not sin."

Let me give you a little bit of theology here. Anger is not the result of the fall. Anger is part of our created nature. Anger was not put into us after Adam and Eve were expelled from the garden. They had the capacity for anger in the garden. But as a result of Adam's sin, everything in us is fallen.

The Reformers used the phrase, "total depravity" to refer to our condition as sinful human beings. We are really confused as people who are made in the image of God but who are fallen. And what the Reformers meant by the phrase "total depravity" is not that we are completely evil inside, but that every part of our being is broken and affected by the fall. Every part of our being is like a white shirt that has been thrown into the laundry and mixed with a brand new red shirt, so that now all that we are has been dyed and is sort of a pink. Every thing in us is just a little less than right; a little less than clean. There is a stain in every fiber.

And because there is a stain in every fiber, because we, as human beings, are totally depraved, what it means is that there is no part of us that is a reliable guide that can be entirely trusted. No part of us. We cannot entirely trust our emotions any longer because we are fallen. My emotions were put in me by God. They are part of the image of God in me, but I cannot entirely rely on them to disclose the heart of God. My emotions sometimes go haywire.

I can be attracted to a woman who is not my wife. I can be angry when I shouldn't be angry. And sometimes I will feel nothing when I should feel something. My emotions are no longer a reliable guide. Neither is my conscience an entirely reliable guide to what is right and what is wrong. Christians do not go around singing Jiminy Cricket's song, "Always let your conscience be your guide" because we know that since we are totally depraved, that is every part of us is fallen, we know that sometimes we can have what Paul describes in 2 Timothy as a "seared conscience." We won't feel anything inside even though something is really wrong. Our consciences can be seared. It can become insensitive to repeated acts of sin.

On the other hand, Paul describes in Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8 a weak conscience where we can feel guilty about something that is, in fact, not sin. Our consciences are not reliable guides.

Neither is our reason an entirely reliable guide. Those who say that you just need to follow your reason have not taken the fall of man seriously enough. Your

logic is off. It is biased. Some people's logic and reason is biased against supernatural things. It doesn't matter what the evidence discloses, the person has made up their mind already. You see, you can have a biased reason. Isaiah 55:8 says:

"Your thoughts are not my thoughts. Your ways are not my ways. As the heavens are high above the earth, so are my thoughts higher than your thoughts and my ways higher than your ways, says the Lord."

Sometimes God's ways do not seem reasonable to us. You see, nothing in us is entirely reliable. That is why we need the scriptures. We need an outside guide to point the way and we need the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit to give wisdom and to open up the scriptures to us and give us internal conviction where we would not have internal conviction.

We must understand that every part of us is fallen, what the reformers called "total depravity." As a result, anger which is put in us by creation gets corrupted very often. And so Paul is very quick to mention that there can be unrighteous anger. He says, "In your anger, do not sin."

You say, "Well, what would be an example of unrighteous anger?"

Unrighteous anger would be found every time we are angry about things that are not sin. You know, some of you might have had this experience. You come home at the end of the day and you are irritated. As a husband, as a wife, you have been working all day long. Perhaps you are living with a roommate and you come home at the end of the day and the house is messy. You got stuck in traffic, or something is not quite right. And perhaps you would take that out on your roommate, husband or your wife, and maybe on a rare occasion you take it out on your kids. Much of that irritation is the result of unrighteous anger. We are not angry because there is any particular sin committed by our spouse against us or our roommate or our kids against us. We are angry because of the accumulated irritations of the day or because someone has not met our expectations regarding what the house ought to look like when we walk in. Or what dinner ought to be like. Or the noise level in the house. Or you are angry because someone was promoted to a position in the church that you thought you should have, that you had a right to have – hey, they've been here 6 months; I've been here for years. I had a right to be the worship leader, or associate pastor, or whatever.

See, one of the ways for you to test yourself for righteous anger and unrighteous anger, is to simply stop and ask yourself the question, "Why am I so angry?" Now, that ought to be very obvious to all of us to stop and ask that question, and yet I think we live life with such a lack of self-consciousness. We drift with our emotions. We feel anger, irritation, frustration, call it what you will—it is anger, and we rarely stop and ask, "Why am I so angry?"

Frequently what we would find as we ask that of ourselves and as we open our hearts to God and say, "God, what is going on inside of me? Why am I ready to explode?" is that we are not at all angry with the person who is nearest to us—our co-worker, our roommate, our spouse, our child—but we are dragging into the relationship accumulated disappointments, frustrated expectations, impatience at having to wait for a doctor's appointment for 2 hours. We are not

at all angry because of sin. We are angry because our spouse has put on weight. Contrary to the theology of Jenny Craig, it is not a sin to put on a few pounds as we get older.

Our expectation regarding a job promotion didn't come in. We got a bad grade on a paper. Someone cut us off on the highway. Our expectation regarding having a good night sleep was frustrated. The baby cried. We were tossing and turning, worrying about something. Our expectation regarding a ministry opportunity didn't materialize the way we thought it would. I'm not now talking about legitimate expectations based on explicit promises that we made and now are broken. I'm talking about the expectations that mostly arise in us.

Let me put it this way. I could have easily added a third horribly misunderstood word in the church today, along side of anger and forgiveness, and that is the word "unity."

Let me take it from this perspective. You know, one of the really helpful contributions of modern psychology I think has been in the area of family systems therapy, in the description of dysfunctional family systems.

No there's a rule in all dysfunctional families and that is a "don't talk, don't speak" rule. See, you can never say Dad is an alcoholic or Mom is an adulterer. No, it's "Dad's not feeling well. We all need to be especially quiet in the house today. Mom is out shopping"

In dysfunctional families the real problem is never talked about openly because that would expose it and we would have to deal with it and that's the thing that the family will not allow to happen. And if someone in the family system violates this rule of "don't speak" and actually mentions the problem, then the system attacks them and labels them as the problem. You are the problem for talking about the problem.

You are the problem for exposing the problem. And in churches that sometimes function as big, dysfunctional families – come on, let's be honest, we do – the person who calls attention to the problem will be labeled as unsubmitive or a Jezebel or as rejecting the principle of unity. See, we are not asked to have phony peace with each other. Let's just not talk and not share our concerns and our hurt, and not confront each other – let's call that unity.

A church I am intimately familiar with had a pastor who essentially embezzled \$200,000 of church money for his own purposes. Then when the matter became known, there was a massive cover-up and the pastor claimed the \$200,000 was a loan. Well, the associate pastor kept the books and was asked about it specifically at a public meeting – "was the pastor given a loan of \$200,000 or did he take it?" The associate pastor lied and said it was always a loan. Well, one of the men who was on the board came to the associate pastor later and said, "Why did you lie?" And he said, "I didn't want to see this church's unity destroyed."

Well, there was no unity in that church, because there was no righteousness, no honest dealing with the sins of the pastor. Forgiveness doesn't mean you try to have peace with someone who won't repent! God is not asking for that, but he is calling you to forgive.

It is sinful to get angry when you are not angry about sin. Abuse is sin. Lying is sin. Embarrassing someone in public may be sin. Taking something that doesn't belong to you is sin. Infidelity is sin.

But your spouse not being as successful as you would like; the fact that your house is hot; that your car breaks down; that you don't have the ministry opportunities that you want; we may be disappointed, but that is not a cause for righteous anger.

And it is sin to process our anger by losing self-control. When Paul says "Be angry but do not sin," I think he is particularly talking about the natural fallen response of losing our tempers and expressing even righteous anger in an unrighteous way. I don't know how many of you have a problem with your temper. You may want to ask the person who lives with you or who used to live with you whether you have a problem with your temper. But if you do, it might be helpful for you, as I did this week, to read through the book of Proverbs. One of the things that I noted in the book of Proverbs is how very often a person who loses their temper is referred to as a fool.

For me, I have found that because I am not letting my other emotions really get expressed, because I am not paying attention to tenderness, and hurt and sorrow, I find over and over, my emotions are only allowed to be given expression through anger. I believe that this is true for many, many men, especially those of us from very bad family backgrounds, that we have so narrowed the range of what we are allowing to have expressed emotionally that it all gets channeled into a short fuse and a bad temper. God helps us to learn some other emotions.

And scripturally, we are urged to exercise self-control. In this we are God-like, Christ-like. See, the Bible describes God as having the capacity to feel great anger and yet being slow to anger. He is not at all quick-tempered. God has a very, very, very, very long fuse. He is incredibly patient with people who sin. And aren't you grateful for that? I certainly am.

The Bible always describes God as not only being loving, but being slow to anger and having tremendous self-control. Yes, there comes a time when God's very long fuse burns down and he explodes in anger, but it takes a huge amount of provocation.

And we are to have long fuses. If you have a short fuse, if you are given to rapid rises of anger, then you need to ask God for that trait of self-control. You need to read through the book of Proverbs and underline all the verses about being quick-tempered. Make them your own. And just one word of encouragement, you know, in the Old Testament when it says that God is slow to anger, literally in the Hebrew it means that God is long-nosed. See, anger was expressed in Hebrew as snorting. Hmmmph. And God was described as being able to hold back the snort. He had a long nose. So those of us who have perhaps grown up with long noses, be encouraged that you are more God-like than the rest.

Look, I don't make up this material, I am simply here to express to you what the Bible says. But it is absolutely the case that we need to put a check on our temper.

The book of Proverbs says in Proverbs 17:14:

“The beginning of strife is like letting out water. Stop contention before a quarrel starts.”

You know, generally, there is no such thing as a little fight any more than there is such a thing as a little crack in the dam. Once the fight starts, once you open up the door, and you really allow a fight to begin, you can end up saying things that you later regret. The words that you use can deeply wound someone you love. And some of us are carrying the baggage of those verbal thrusts and wounds for years. Parents who just attacked us or cursed us. Husbands or wives who verbally battered you, threatened divorce, called you names. Because in our anger we sinned and we let the dam break. Don't do that. Don't open the door to a fight. Check your temper.

Paul goes on and says that the second check on your anger is not only “Do not sin,” but “Do not let the sun go down on your anger.” I believe what he is talking about there is do not nurse, do not nurse your anger. Do not feed it and hold onto it.

Let me give you an illustration about what I mean by nursing or feeding anger. I once read a story about a guy in Alaska who had two husky dogs, a dark one and a light one. He took the dogs to different towns and would have them fight each other. People would bet on the dogs. And sometimes the owner of the dogs would bet on the dark dog and sometimes he would bet on the light dog. Whatever dog he bet on, that dog always won the fight.

Well, this one fellow asked the owner “How do you know which dog to bet on all the time? How come the dog you always bet on always wins? How is it that you are always right?”

The owner said, “Well, that is easy. Whichever dog I have been feeding for the past week is the one who is going to win.”

And the same thing is true about us. Whatever you feed emotionally, that is the dog that is going to win inside of you. If you nurse and feed anger, that is what is going to win. If you nurse and feed sexual fantasy, that will win. If you nurse and feed kindness, kindness will win. Whatever we sow regularly in our hearts, we will reap.

How do you know if you have let the sun go down on your anger? Let me give you a few tests. They all start with the letter “R”. Here is how you will know if you are not letting go of your anger, but you are nursing it and feeding it.

The first thing you are going to note is that there is resentment. You cannot think about this other person positively. You are not necessarily exploding in anger toward this other person. No, you have a settled state of anger that colors your view of this other person so that you cannot think about them positively or warmly. You don't even like hearing about them referred to positively. Resentment means you have nursed your anger.

And then there is revenge. This desire inside to get even with them because of what they have done to you. They owe you and you are going to get even. And so you get even by gossiping about them. By dropping little hints to everyone around that they have hurt you in some way. That they are poor husbands or wives or colleagues or church leaders. You can exact revenge in a

million ways. If you are a spouse you can withhold sex. With your roommate you can pout. With a coworker you can be icy cold. With someone in your church you can share confidentially with a few dozen friends about your burden for so & so, just for the purpose of prayer support. Some people will go out and have an affair because “they will get even with their spouse for what has been done to them.” Revenge.

Number three would be reminders. You know you have let the sun go down on your anger with someone when another person who is in a similar position who has done no wrong to you, another person who has similar characteristics, gets you angry. If every time you encounter authority, you get angry; if every time you encounter another pastor or a school principal or a teacher or a boss, there is a rise in you of hurt; every time you get in a situation where somebody says no to you or rejects you and that spurs in you this response of anger, I can bet that you probably had a problem with authority, probably your Dad, or a former teacher or a church leader, some time in the past. I have watched this in men for years. Folks who have unresolved anger toward their parents almost always have trouble with authority in the future. Authority in the church, sometimes authority on the job.

And I have noted the same thing with men whose mothers were particularly controlling. They respond to their wives in a similar fashion. The wife makes a suggestion and the husband just flies out of control. “You are not going to tell me what to do. No woman is going to control me.” Where is that coming from? They let the sun go down on their anger with Mom! Reminders.

Number four: reaction, which is implicit in the other things, but whenever someone overreacts to a small provocation, you know they have been nursing anger. When you see in you a small spark creating a huge explosion, something is going off there, my friend. There is gas below the surface that is exploding. If there were no gas, there would be no explosion.

Finally, number five: resolutions. I know someone has let the sun go down on their anger when they carry with them these internal vows, these resolutions, “I will never be like Dad in this area. I will never be in debt. I will never trust a pastor no matter what. I will never be dependent.” Oh, my friend, you have a problem with anger.

Do you see resentment, revenge, reminders, reactions, resolutions? Then you have allowed the sun to go down on your anger.

Marlene, for years, has chided me about this and I think this is a good rule for married couples that as a general principle you never go to bed mad. You resolve it. Put a clear limit on the length of time that you are going to permit anger to remain in your heart toward your spouse and you will have a good marriage. Let it stretch from a day to a week, a month, a year, and you’ve got a problem.

Do not give the Devil an opportunity! If you have been hurt or offended or abused and have never dealt with that hurt or offense or abuse, and the wound is simply allowed to stay open, that wound can get infected demonically. And so the wounds in us need to be healed over.

But it is not only demonization that Paul is talking about by not giving the devil an opportunity through anger, there are other kinds of mischief that the devil can work through our anger, certainly. Demonic activity would be seen in the fracturing of relationships in the church and in families. You know, again, everything that God loves and works for, the devil strongly opposes. God's work is to bring people together, to reconcile relationships, to have us learn to live together in peace, to love one another and give our lives to each other in the church, to support one another, to assist one another, to meet each other's needs. And when we allow anger to simply be unhealed in us, all that does is fracture our relationships with one another and we give the devil an opportunity to oppose God's plan for the unity, the perfect unity, of the body. This is where history is intended to go toward, as Paul says in Ephesians 1, "the summing up [the pulling together] of all things."

And so we give the devil an opportunity to oppose God's purpose in history by having unhealed anger. And, of course, unhealed anger can lead to our own emotional distress. Psychiatrists have told us for years that a good percentage of people in mental hospitals, as well as the neuroses that are commonly treated, are simply the results of unhealed anger.

So, how do we slam the door on the devil's plan to get us to some degree demonized, to break our relationships, to bring us into emotional distress? Well, the door, that entry way of the devil to our spirits, is slammed through forgiveness. Forgiveness. We slam the door on the devil's plan for anger through forgiveness. I want to quickly say that just as anger is not understood by most Christians, neither is forgiveness.

We are going to finish up with one of Jesus' stories in one moment. But I want to mention a few things to you, to clarify, that forgiveness doesn't mean so that your understanding of forgiveness can be biblical. We are so confused about what forgiveness means; let me share with you what it doesn't mean.

First, forgiveness does not mean that the offender has not sinned. Forgiveness is not saying that the person who hurt you did not sin. You are not playing pretend by forgiveness. If someone has abused you, you are not trying to deny that and say, "No, the abuse never happened." Or to manipulate words around and say, "Well, he really didn't mean it." Or "He had a bad background." Forgiveness does not mean that we call sin anything other than sin.

Forgiveness does not mean that we make excuses for the offender. Forgiveness does not mean that we even try to understand the offender. Forgiveness doesn't mean that you pretend that sin doesn't hurt. How often people play pretend with themselves in order to try to forgive. "Well, it really was no big deal." "Forget it." "Oh, it didn't hurt." "Oh, it was nothing."

Sin is something. Small sins, big sins—**SIN IS SOMETHING**. And we don't play pretend with sin. Forgiveness doesn't mean that we call sin anything other than sin. Or that we say about the offender that they did anything other than sin. Forgiveness does not take us out of the realm of reality and put us into the realm of pretense.

And second, forgiveness does not mean that the other person has necessarily acknowledged their sin. Many people say, "Well, I would forgive them if they simply acknowledged what they did wrong."

Let me point out a little distinction here that many of you probably have not thought of. I believe there is a biblical distinction between forgiveness, which is a unilateral act, and reconciliation, which is bilateral, which is a two-party act. Forgiveness is something that I can choose to do whatever the offender chooses. Forgiveness does not require that the offender repent. Forgiveness does not require that the offender acknowledge their sins. Forgiveness does not require that the offender confess.

But reconciliation, peace with another person, a restored relationship (that is what I mean by the word reconciliation), absolutely requires that the other person acknowledge their sin, come to grips with it, stop hiding or lying about it, confess it and repent of it.

A wife can forgive her husband for his infidelities whether or not that husband repents. But there can be no peace between the two of them and no restored relationship until he forsakes his adulteries and turns from them, confesses his sins, and walks in repentance.

For those of you who like to take notes, you may wish to look up a text in the Old Testament, 2 Kings 9, regarding Jehu, a king. Jehu is God's avenger for the idolatry that was in Israel. He was wreaking havoc on the house of Ahab, killing everyone in sight. The house of Ahab comes out to try to make peace with Jehu. And Jehu responds with a classic line from 2 Kings 9:22:

"How can there be peace as long as all the idolatry and witchcraft of your mother Jezebel abounds?"

We cannot have peace with someone who will not repent. You cannot reconcile with someone who still has their back to you. You can forgive them. We will talk about what forgiveness means in a moment. But you can't make peace with them.

And so, if there is someone who has abused you, or offended you or offended the church you are in, in the past and they have not repented or acknowledged the abuse or offense, yes, today you can forgive them; but, you cannot have peace with them or pretend that you have a fully restored relationship with them without repentance.

If there has been church abuse, if there has been physical abuse, if there has been verbal abuse, the condition of peace is repentance. And not only can I not be reconciled and have peace with someone who has refused to repent, but it is positively foolish of me to announce to such a person, "I forgive you" before that person repents. Luke 17:3, I believe is talking about that public declaration of forgiveness where the Lord says:

"If your brother repents, forgive him."

So many times I have seen people in a good-hearted, but I believe foolish way, walk up to someone who is hardened, who is still having affairs, who is still being an abuser or a gossip, still drinking, still doing something that is an offense to them or their family, walk up to such a person and say, "I forgive you. I just want you to know that."

No, again, we can forgive, which is an act that will transpire between us and God. But we don't announce that forgiveness to the offending person until they repent!. And we certainly cannot have a restored relationship with the offending person without that person's repentance.

So much of the confusion regarding forgiveness and unity is the result of people attempting to have relationship with someone who simply won't have relationship with them based on the conditions of change and righteousness and repentance. People feel pushed into a corner, and parts of the church jump in and say, "Gee, I am a Christian. I am supposed to forgive. I am supposed to be one with my brothers. This other person continues to be abusive. This other person continues to use cocaine. She still gossips all the time. It is really hard for me."

Of course it is hard for you. God is not asking you to try to have a restored relationship with somebody who won't relate to you on the basis of righteousness. You know that verse in Romans 14? "For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit." There's an order in this thing. First we have righteousness – honest, authentic repentance. Then we have peace. So many of us want to reverse the order and have peace without righteousness first, or joy when there is no peace. It's righteousness, then peace, then joy. But he is calling upon you to forgive them. What does forgiveness mean?

Well, in Matthew 18, Jesus tells a little story that I am going to finish up with. It is Matthew 18, the parable is not difficult to remember.

"A servant owed a great deal of money to his Lord, who was about to put him in prison. But the servant said, 'Have mercy upon me, give me time and I will pay you everything.' 'Very well,' said the Lord, 'certainly I will.' The servant was very thankful, very pleased. He happened to meet a fellow servant who owed him a very small sum of money, a trivial sum. His fellow servant said, 'Have mercy on me. Give me some time.' But the servant grabbed that fellow servant by the throat and he said, 'No. I must have it now.' And he threw that fellow servant into prison. When the Lord heard of it, he called the servant in and said, 'You wicked servant. I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' And in anger his master turned him over to the jailers [literally the torturers] until he could pay back all he owed."

This is how Jesus concludes and says: "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from the heart."

This is a wonderful story about what true forgiveness is as it relates to our forgiveness of other people who have offended or hurt us in the past, whether inside or outside the church. True forgiveness starts with a deep recognition of our own forgiveness by the Lord Jesus Christ. When we are considering whether to forgive another human being and how to forgive another human being who has deeply hurt us, the starting point is to call to mind the Lord Jesus Christ's forgiveness of us. Don't ever start by calling to mind the other person's sin

against you. But first and foremost, start by calling to mind all that the Lord Jesus Christ has forgiven you for.

“Lord, don’t allow me to remember this other person’s sin first of all. Call to my mind my own sin against you and the things that you have forgiven me of.”

Why should you do that? Well, certainly not to torture yourself. Not to make yourself walk over hot coals or to make yourself feel guilty. No. We do that in order to tenderize our hearts, which sometimes get very hard toward people who have offended us, but as we contemplate the deep forgiveness of the Lord, our hearts become tender and the position between us and that other sinner begins to level out. People say, “I just can’t forgive so & so for what they’ve done.”

You see, when somebody has offended us, we stand, in a certain sense, above them and look down on them. But you can’t forgive from above. You forgive from level ground. And so we must start by bringing ourselves down to level ground with that other sinner. We all stand on level ground at the foot of the cross.

“Lord, remind me of my sins and your deep forgiveness.”

This is where almost all people fail in forgiving others, because there are very few of us that really understand God’s forgiveness, or really have received in a deep way the grace of God that washes away all of our sins.

The servant in the story certainly did not understand the grace of God and stumbled at step one. He simply wanted more time to pay off his debt. What a foolish request. He had about a billion dollar debt. He could have never paid off his debt to the Lord and nor can we, through self-atonement, through guilt, through working harder, ever pay off our debt of sin to God. And yet, we always try.

There are very few human beings who allow their sins to be totally forgiven without adding to it any of their own works. It seems too easy. It seems too free. Why, I might go crazy. If I am let off so scot-free, I might go crazy.

The Lord says, “You might. But if you really receive my grace, I believe you will be changed.”

We must start off with a deep recognition of the grace of God toward us for our own sins.

Call to mind our own sins. And then step two is that we call to mind the other person’s sins against us. “Lord, help me now to react and remember all the things that they said to me and all the things that they have done. All of it.” How they embarrassed you, how they hurt you. Tell God what happened, what it felt like, all the bitter hurt you’ve reaped in your life. Tell God everything. For some of us this can seem overwhelming. “No. I don’t want to face it.” How else will you air out that dark closet of abuse? How else will you set your own heart free? How else will you ever be cleansed unless you open the door and say, “God, bring it out, but be merciful to me as you bring it out. And Lord, don’t give me more than I can bear [sometimes we have to pray that]. No more than I can bear.” And as the Lord brings it out, one by one, we call those things sin. Yes, they do owe me a debt. Yes, that is sin.

And step three is I give up my rights to collect any debt from them any longer. I am in the position of prayer. I see that they owe me. This is what you robbed

from me. You robbed me of respect. You robbed me of my virginity. You robbed me of my innocence. You robbed me of my ministry or my income. You robbed me of a good marriage. You robbed me of a happy home. You stole a relative, or two years of my life, or my kids from me. This is what you stole from me or from the church. This is the debt you owe me. I am in the position of prayer and before God, in prayer, I tear up the debt.

Forgiveness is nothing other than a sacrifice of my right to collect that debt from you. That is what forgiveness is. I sacrifice my right to collect a debt from you. And you sacrifice your right to collect your debt from me. We tear the bill up before God. "Lord, I tear the bill up that my father owed me. I tear it up before you. Yes, there was a bill. I tear it up."

"I tear up the bill from my ex-husband or ex-wife. I tear up the bill from an old boyfriend or girlfriend."

"I tear up the bill from other boys or girls when I was growing up in school. I tear the bills up from other churches. I rip them up. I sacrifice my right to collect from these people any longer."

And finally, if and only if the other person repents, be reconciled, totally and completely, and never mention the sin again. They owe you nothing. Their debt has been torn up. You have forgiven them.