

“Life Improvements ---- Mountaintop Makeovers --- Anger Altars?”

Proverbs 12:14-28 & Matthew 5:21-26

“Leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.” Matthew 5:24

Proverbs 12:14-28

¹⁴ *From the fruit of the mouth one is filled with good things, and manual labor has its reward.*

¹⁵ *Fools think their own way is right, but the wise listen to advice.*

¹⁶ *Fools show their anger at once, but the prudent ignore an insult.*

¹⁷ *Whoever speaks the truth gives honest evidence, but a false witness speaks deceitfully.*

¹⁸ *Rash words are like sword thrusts, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.*

¹⁹ *Truthful lips endure forever, but a lying tongue lasts only a moment.*

²⁰ *Deceit is in the mind of those who plan evil, but those who counsel peace have joy.*

²¹ *No harm happens to the righteous, but the wicked are filled with trouble.*

²² *Lying lips are an abomination to the LORD, but those who act faithfully are his delight.*

²³ *One who is clever conceals knowledge, but the mind of a fool broadcasts folly.*

²⁴ *The hand of the diligent will rule, while the lazy will be put to forced labor.*

²⁵ *Anxiety weighs down the human heart, but a good word cheers it up.*

²⁶ *The righteous gives good advice to friends, but the way of the wicked leads astray.*

²⁷ *The lazy do not roast their game, but the diligent obtain precious wealth.*

²⁸ *In the path of righteousness there is life, in walking its path there is no death.*

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus begins with the Beatitudes and speaks about the character traits of a Christian. A Christian will be poor in spirit, sorrowful for sin, meek, hungry and thirsty for righteousness, merciful, pure in heart, a peacemaker and will endure persecution. As Christians, we are called to be salt and the light to the world. In the rest of chapter five of Matthew, Jesus challenges those who are listening with powerful, negative statements for living a righteous life. Each statement is introduced by a formula, “*You have heard it said to the people long ago*” or “*You have heard that it is said.*” In each case the points are similar--true Christianity arises from the heart.

Let us listen for God’s Word to our hearts this morning as we prepare our hearts to receive communion.

Matthew 5:21-26

You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’²² But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire.²³ So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you,²⁴ leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.²⁵ Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison.²⁶ Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.ⁱ

Let us pray --- Dear Lord, God Almighty, giver of the Word of Life and the Light of the World, May Your words be alive and redemptive to our hearts and lives today. May Your words fill our hearts and help us to grow in Your love, Your reconciliation, Your forgiveness and Your grace. Amen

Today we are going to talk about something practical--anger. I believe we all struggle with anger! We don't have much time since we are celebrating the Sacrament of Communion, so let's get going.

Crazy things happen to our sense of judgment when we get angry. In February 2009, a 27-year-old woman from Fort Pierce, Florida, walked into a McDonald's restaurant and ordered a 10 piece McNuggets meal. You know how it is when you're hungry and you have a taste for something particular. Your imagination starts working and you can almost taste those McNuggets. Well, that's when things got really tough for this hungry woman. The person behind the counter took the order and received payment. The McDonald's employee then discovered that they were out of those bite-sized, warm, tasty McNuggets. The employee told the customer that the restaurant had run out of McNuggets, and she would have to get something else from the menu. The customer asked for her money back. The employee said all sales were final, and she could have a larger priced item from the menu if she wanted. The customer got angry. She wanted McNuggets—not a Big Mac, not a McRib, not a Quarter Pounder. She was angry, really angry and she took out her cell phone and called 911. Apparently the 911 workers didn't take her seriously because the McNuggets-loving woman had to call three times to get help! She never got her McNuggets, but she did get a ticket from police for misusing 911. Anger twists our perspective, skews our judgment. Anger makes small things big and big things small. When we're angry, having to eat a burger instead of McNuggets is a disaster, and calling 911 is not a big deal.¹¹ Crazy things happen when we get angry.

WHAT IS ANGER --- THE ALTAR OF ANGER

Anger is a feeling. Anger is an emotional response. Over my many years of ministry, I have done a lot of pre-marital and marital counseling. One of the biggest topics that we discuss during my time with couples is the reality of dealing with anger. We spend a lot of time talking about feelings. This past week, I did some pre-marital counseling for a young couple. I had married their close friends a few years ago. As I began sharing, I said, ***“feelings are not right or wrong --- feelings just are. It is what we do with our feelings that makes them right or wrong.”*** The young bride-to-be began to laugh. She said that her girlfriend had told her that I was big on feelings and that I would say, ***“feelings are not right or wrong ---- feelings just are. It is what we do with our feelings that makes them right or wrong.”***

I am big on feelings! I believe that all our feelings are God-given. Every feeling we have is a feeling or emotion that God has--we are created in God's image. Read through the Psalms and find out how David prayed through his feelings! In 1981 Jac and I made a Marriage Encounter and here's what we learned: feelings are not right or wrong --- feelings just are. It is what we do with our feelings that makes them right or wrong.

In Ephesians Paul writes these words about anger; ***“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 4:26-27) ***“Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger.”*** What powerful advice. Our reading from Proverbs has some sound advice for anger. ***“Fools show their anger at once, but the prudent ignore an insult.”*** In fact, I have included a list of Proverbs that deal with anger for you to look over and reflect on. Proverbs are for head wisdom and I encourage you to take home a sheet (holding up a sheet of paper) and fill your head with some wisdom from God’s Word. Point one about anger: ***“Anger is a feeling. Anger is neither right nor wrong, it is a feeling --- it just is--it is what we do with our anger that makes it right or wrong.”***

HOW IS ANGER PRODUCED

If anger is a feeling, then how is anger produced? In his book “The Divine Conspiracy,” Dallas Willard sates it this way, “Anger is a feeling that seizes us in our body and immediately impels us toward interfering with, and possibly even harming, those who have thwarted our will and interfered with our life.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Anger is a feeling or an emotion that is always driven by something else. Anger is a secondary emotion that is often driven by one of three major emotions: **fear, pain or frustration**. What happens when you back a cat into a corner? You have one scared cat because it is afraid. The same thing happens to us when we are afraid. We recently studied a book by Max Lucado called “Fearless.” Max writes about the power fear possesses to turn us into beastly people:

“[Fear] turns us into control freaks ... [for] ... fear, at its center, is a perceived loss of control. When life spins wildly, we grab for a component of life we can manage: our diet, the tidiness of our home, the armrest of a plane, or, in many cases, people. The more insecure we feel, the meaner we become. We growl and bare our fangs. Why? Because we are bad? In part. But also because we feel cornered.

Martin Niemöller documents an extreme example of this. He was a German pastor who took a heroic stand against Adolf Hitler. When he first met the dictator in 1933, Niemöller stood at the back of the room and listened. Later, when his wife asked him what he'd learned, he said, "I discovered that Herr Hitler is a terribly frightened man." Fear releases the tyrant within.^{iv} When we are afraid, we become angry.

The second emotion that drives anger is pain --- pain drives anger. When you drop a hammer on your foot or you slam your finger in a cabinet, you become angry because you have pain. Pain drives anger and fear drives anger. The number one emotion that drives anger is frustration.

Frustration is a feeling of disappointment, exasperation, or weariness caused by our goals being thwarted or desires being unsatisfied. How often do we yell at the person who is slowing down in front of us? How often do we lose our temper when things are not going our way? How often have we lost it with our children when it seems they are not listening? How often do we become

upset with God when we think God is not listening? Frustration, disappointment, exasperation, weariness, being at the end of our rope can cause us anger problems.

Anger is a feeling. Anger is not right or wrong—it just is—what we with our anger is what makes our behavior right or wrong!

THE CURE FOR THE ALTER OF ANGER

A Sunday school teacher was discussing the Ten Commandments with her class of five and six-year-olds. After explaining the commandment to honor thy father and thy mother, she asked, "Is there a commandment that teaches us how to treat our brothers and sisters?" Without missing a beat, one little boy answered, "Thou shall not kill."

The Pharisees and the teachers of the law were taking the sixth commandment found in Exodus 20:13 "Thou shalt not kill" and combining it with a verse from Numbers 35:30 that demanded death for anyone who unlawfully took innocent life. The Pharisees added to God's Word and they thought they had righteousness beyond others. Jesus challenges them by saying, *"But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable to the hell of fire. So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift."*

We don't have enough time this morning to go into all the Greek and all the theological meanings behind these two verses. But the first step in the cure is to admit that we get angry. The aim of Jesus' illustration on anger is to bring us to terms with what is in our heart. What Jesus is teaching is that the righteousness of the Kingdom of God comes from the heart—our heart. We will either turn our anger inward and hurt ourselves, or we will turn our anger outward and hurt others.

SO WHAT?

So what? What can we learn from God's word about anger this morning?

Seven years into our marriage, my wife and I went for counseling. After several visits, the secular counselor asked me what I was going to do with my anger. I laughed at her and told her that I was not angry. I grew up in an angry home and I knew what anger looked like. I had sworn I would never be angry. A few years later, we found a great man named Joe—a former pastor—who helped me to learn how to deal with and express my anger. One day Jac and I were in the kitchen and I said to her, "I'm really angry." Jac started to jump and dance around. I asked her what she was doing. She said, "We've been married ten years and I have never heard you say that you were angry. WOOHOO!" We talked as I worked through my anger issue. I titled this message "Anger Altars" because it is a really good visual for us. Many of us spend a lot of time at our "Anger Altar." We've built quite a monument—and we think it will protect us

from our fear, our pain or our frustrations. We decorate these altars with our hurtful words, or actions, we enslave our hearts and lives to these pitiful monuments. Here is Jesus, telling us how to stop that meaningless worship: **leave your gift and go be reconciled.**

Remember that anger is a feeling and feelings are not right or wrong. It is what we do with our feelings that makes them right or wrong. We can be like the woman at McDonalds and lose it all over a few McNuggets or we can take Jesus' advice and confess our anger.

Here's the "so what" for us today: Are you angry? GOOD! (Dance around!) That's the first healthy step! Remember—anger is a secondary feeling—there's another feeling that is more real than your anger—fear, pain or frustration. Now—pray and ask God to help you figure out how to be reconciled in this issue.

I know-- this is all going to come down to one thing: forgiveness. You may have to forgive yourself, you may have to forgive someone else who really hurt you, you may even have to forgive God. But if the Sermon on the Mount is worth building our foundation on—then we need to really wrestle with what Jesus is saying. He is asking us to stop spending so much time worshiping at our Anger Altars. Jesus is asking us to trade one altar for another—HIS. Today we come to this altar—the table of Jesus Christ.

This whole series is about the wise and the foolish—and what we each build our lives upon. The wise build on the solid rock of Jesus Christ. The foolish build on sinking sand. We are the salt and light of the world—we are a city on a hill. The world is watching and needs to see how we leave our anger altars and how we begin the healing process--by coming to this table. This is the good news—that whatever our issues are—whatever our pain, whatever our fears, whatever our frustrations—we can leave it here. We can leave it here because Jesus nailed it all to a lonely cross on a lonely hill a long time ago. Jesus has overcome it all—hell, death, the grave. He rose...and lives. Jesus is alive and we are able to receive grace upon grace at this table. We really can leave this altar this morning as a forgiven and forgiving person.

Come to the table.

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ⁱ *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version.*, Thomas Nelson Publishers, Nashville, 1989

ⁱⁱ Associated Press, "Florida woman calls 911 3 times over McNuggets," www.news.yahoo.com

ⁱⁱⁱ Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy*, Harper Collins Publishers, San Francisco, 1998

^{iv} Max Lucado, *Fearless* Thomas Nelson, Nashville, 2009