

Anger and Self-Control

Various proverbs

We are continuing our series called *Emotional Intelligence: Proverbs on the inner life*.
What happens on the inside of a man or woman is of great importance to God
and the Book of Proverbs is a good place to help us reflect on that inner life.

Today's theme is *anger*,
and it seems to me that anger is not a straight forward emotion.
Is anger a virtue, or is it a vice?
I think we hear mixed messages about anger.

When I was a teenager I used to listen to my Walkman on the way to school.
One band that I listened to had a very angry name:
Rage against the Machine.
And their music was—and still is—angry! Both in lyrics and in tone.
I remember one song which told me that *anger is a gift*—
that was one of the lyrics—*anger is a gift*
Why is this band so angry? Why were they 'raging against the machine'?

Well they are a very political band
and they are very angry with some of the injustices in the world.
And so perhaps that was a good type of anger.
Anger can motivate people to make some important changes in the world;
in that sense perhaps anger can be a virtue.

However, we've all experienced the destructive side of anger, haven't we?
Perhaps in the family home,
perhaps in the workplace,
maybe on the road or on the sporting pitch.
Someone feels wronged or slighted,
emotions are triggered, tempers flare and someone gets hurt.
Anger can certainly be a vice, can't it?

When we turn to the Scriptures,
I think we see that the Bible reflects something of anger's complexity.
On one hand Paul instructs the Ephesians in 4:31
to get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger.
He says the same thing in Colossians 3:8.
In Galatians 5:20 Paul warns us against 'fits of rage'.
So Paul would have us work very hard at not being angry; it's a vice to avoid.

But then in Mark ch 3 v5 we're told that Jesus became angry.
The occasion was the healing of the man with the shriveled hand,

Jesus asks whether it was lawful to heal the man's hand on the Sabbath. Everyone refused to answer and that made Jesus very cross because it was clear that, although they wouldn't admit it, the members of the synagogue weren't interested in seeing this man healed.

So again, perhaps anger can be a virtue especially in response to unjust situations.

I think the OT Book of Proverbs provides an interesting point of view that can help us navigate between these two poles of virtue and a vice. I already knew that Proverbs spoke about anger and the human temper, but as I reviewed the material this week I was struck by the *specific angle* that Proverbs is interested in.

Let's just read through the first 4 proverbs that I have on your outline there, and take note of the pattern that emerges.

12:16 Fools show their annoyance *at once*, but the prudent overlook an insult.

14:16-17 The wise fear the LORD and shun evil, but a fool is *hotheaded* and yet feels secure. A *quick-tempered* person does foolish things, and the one who devises evil schemes is hated

14:29 Whoever is patient has great understanding, but one who is *quick-tempered* displays folly.

15:18 A *hot-tempered* person stirs up conflict, but the one who is patient calms a quarrel.

Anyone note the pattern that emerges?

What *kind* of anger is Proverbs interested in?

Hot-headed, hot-tempered, Quick-tempered, showing annoyance at once;

It's the quick temper that Proverbs wants to warn us about, not necessarily anger itself but the habit of becoming angry very quickly. Perhaps this is one key to navigating the two poles that we spoke about: If we commit to slowing this emotion down,

then we might increase the chance of employing it as a virtue

rather than a vice.

The NT contains a similar emphasis. In the book of James we are encouraged to be quick to listen, slow to speak and *slow to become angry*, because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires. (James 1:19-20)

What are the dangers of indulging in a hot temper?

Proverbs doesn't explain much about anger's consequences, but it does underscore that a quick-temper is foolish:

14:17 A *quick-tempered* person does foolish things, and the very next verse on the sheet:

14:29 one who is quick-tempered displays folly.

Why is it foolish? A hot-temper can cause you harm:

19:19 A hot-tempered person must pay the penalty;

rescue them, and you will have to do it again.

This verse is directed more towards the person who is tempted to save an angry person from the consequences of their anger, but the verse does remind us that anger has a cost for the perpetrator: hit a table out of rage and you might break your hand, yell at an employee or a customer and you'll lose their loyalty.

One consequence of a quick anger is that it stirs up conflict; it creates anger in other people, and that's bad for you and for them
 15:18 once more: A hot-tempered person stirs up conflict
 29:22 repeats the same: An angry person stirs up conflict.
 Verse 26:17 is wonderfully vivid: Like one who grabs a stray dog by the ears is someone who rushes into a quarrel not their own.
 Note the idea of rushing in, it's that impulsiveness at work again.
 What's going to happen if you rush in and grab a stray dog by the ears? It'll turn around and try and take your hand clean off, won't it?
 This is the danger in allowing your anger to create further conflict—you're provoking others and increasing the possibility of being hurt in return.

And finally an unchecked temper acts like a gateway sin; it's the first step to a whole host of other thoughts and actions that are deeply offensive against God
 The second half of 29:22, a hot-tempered person commits many sins.
 Allow anger to stew and you could find yourself wading into envy and bitterness, slander and verbal abuse, even physical expressions of violence.
 If you are someone who gets angry in the home, then for your sake as well as the sake of others, do something to reign that in
 before you end up being taken away in the back of a police car and charged with domestic assault.

It's a very foolish thing to allow yourself to develop a quick temper.
 It's harmful to you, it's harmful to others, and it's offensive to God and leaves you open to God's judgment.
 That's why a hot temper is a problem.

Are there any *positive* steps we can take?
 Does this ancient book of wisdom show us a way forward?
 Indeed it does.

What I've discovered as I've reflected on these verses this week are what I've called four *alternative frames of mind*, four different internal habits, four processes maybe, that we can turn to as either alternatives to anger or as controls upon anger.

These are the kinds of things that—with the Holy Spirit's help—

we might want to develop in the inside.
We're really just talking about what the NT calls the fruit of the Spirit,
the result of the Spirit's work within us.

First of all Proverbs speaks about *self-control*.

25:28 Like a city whose walls are broken through is a person who lacks self-control.
Self-control is mandatory if you wish to live a stable, safe and successful life
If self-control is lacking, then you're exposed to all sorts of dangers,
just like a city with broken down walls.

Ch 25 vs16-17 don't talk about anger specifically,
but they do talk about self-control in a way that is helpful for our topic
If you find honey, eat just enough—too much of it, and you will vomit.
Seldom set foot in your neighbor's house— too much of you, and they will hate you.
The self-control that's spoken about here
is that of making frugal use of a good thing.
Honey is good, but not too much of it,
You can be a blessing by being a good neighbor,
but don't overstay your welcome.
Perhaps the same self-control can be applied to anger.
Get angry about some things, but it's an emotion that best used sparingly.

It's a bit like the way I use chili: I think a little bit of chili in my food is good,
but I can't have too much of it because it gives me the hiccups!
For me the key in using chili is to show restraint,
Anger works best in much the same way.

Another thing to consider is the possibility of avoiding anger all together.
On one hand you don't want to become a complete conflict avoider,
sometimes it's healthy to stand up for yourself
or to speak up in a situation that's unfair,
but it's also worth thinking about the value of avoiding a fight when you can.
20:3 It is to one's honor to avoid strife, but every fool is quick to quarrel.
Looking for a fight is never a wise way to be—
wisdom is probably on the side
of those who do what they can to avoid arguments and angry situations.

I once heard an old story about a group of martial arts students,
who were walking down a street in Japan to their master's house,
when they startled a horse as they walked behind it.
And as the horse reacted and kicked its legs out,
the student at the front of the group was able to quickly maneuver
and twist his body out of the way of this jumping animal.

When they arrived at their master's house the other students told their teacher
about the incredible skills of their friend.

But the master become angry with his pupils and said to them
 “A good student of mine would have walked on the other side of the street!”
 His point was that the best practice of all is avoiding unnecessary conflict.

Maybe you’re the type of person who loves to argue!
 Maybe you’re very good at arguing.
 It doesn’t matter how well you can handle yourself in a scrap,
 be it verbal or physical,
 wisdom dictates that you’re better off leaving the fight alone all together.

But sometimes the fight comes to you, doesn’t it.
 Sometimes an insult is thrown our way, sometimes offence is given.
 Proverbs wants to suggest we think about overlooking it all together!
 12:16 Fools show their annoyance at once, but the prudent *overlook* an insult.
 19:11 A person’s wisdom yields patience; it is to one’s glory *to overlook an offence*.

You would have seen on the news the response of Senator Fraser Anning
 after he was assaulted by Egg Boy. He turns around and clocks him in face.
 Contrast Senator Anning with former Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger.
 When big Arnie was Governor of California he was egged,
 and he could have caused a lot of damage if he decided to hit back,
 but instead he simply said “that protestor owes be bacon as well!”.
 It was to his glory that he overlooked the offence.

You might ask yourself
 “But how on earth can we overlook the horrible things that people do to us?!”
 Ch 20 v 22 gives us an idea: Do not say, “I’ll pay you back for this wrong!”
 Wait for the LORD, and he will avenge you.
 God sees the wrong things that people do, he won’t forget them,
 he will bring about his own justice. And so delegate your vengeance to him.
 It’s the same advice that Paul gives us in our NT reading from Romans 12
 isn’t it? Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God’s wrath.

And of course, the NT also speaks of God’s willingness to withhold his judgment
 and even to overlook the sins of those who turn back to him.
 2 Peter 3:9 tells us that God is patient towards us,
 not wishing us to perish but waiting for us to turn back to him
 and to accept the forgiveness that’s available through the work of Jesus.
 He’s both the judge of the wicked and the forgiver of the remorseful,
 And both are reasons for us to overlook the sins of others.

And finally one other internal process we can employ
 is to keep our anger on hold until we find out more information.
 19:2 Desire without knowledge is not good—how much more will hasty feet miss the way!
 You may recognize the feeling:
 in your anger you desire to put someone back in their place,

