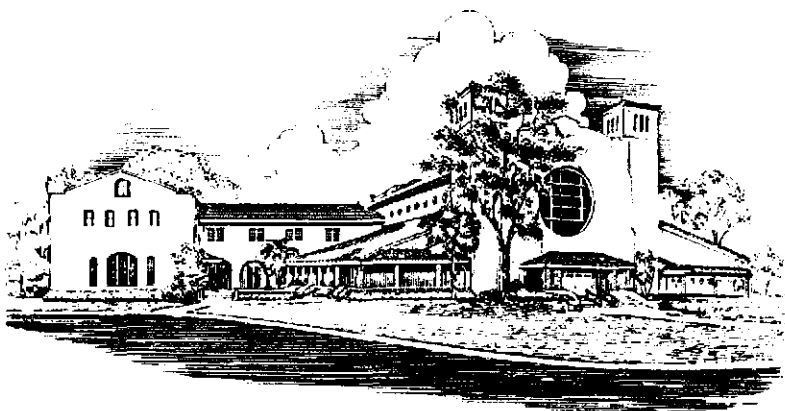


First Church Pulpit

**"FOUR SOURCES OF ANGER, AND
FOUR WAYS TO SETTLE THEM"**

**Text: "Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go
down on your anger." — (Ephesians 4:26)**



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I have set a tall order before us in one single sermon, the topic entitled "Four Sources of Anger, and Four Ways to Settle Them". It is so comprehensive that we can barely hope to finish it, but I plan to share a few ideas with you, about the kind of anger which I mean. Defined by Webster as "strong feeling of displeasure or rage", this power is as far-reaching as any power on earth. It damages relationships at every level. It destroys homes and marriages. It distorts the soul of little children. It drives people into child abuse. It dips its menacing tentacles into social and community organizations, and into churches too. It struts around unobserved and unannounced on the stage of International Negotiations. It deepens our uncertainty of whether we can avoid another war. It drives a wedge between God and men and women. And finally, it dives into the subconscious of all of us and works its weary way against the wholesome, happy, healthy people we try to be. What an awesome power anger is!

Each of us has seen it in action too often: how a friendship can be destroyed with a few angry words, how a loving marriage can disintegrate within an hour, how a perfectly charming person, under certain circumstances, can become a raving maniac, how fights break out, and often even murder comes...all because someone is angry. And, we feel it deep inside ourselves as well, every last one of us...

when we say things we did not want to say...do things we did not want to do. And so many words and actions, once accomplished, can never be withdrawn. It is an alien power...awesome...awful.

Our concern today is to talk about its sources: where it comes from, though there are many other concerns for many other days. Our question sounds like: Why is there anger in the world? Does it do any good at all? Would it be better, if it were not here? If so, how can we eradicate it, or at least eliminate its most abusive presence?

Thirty years ago, a professor friend of mine gave a little speech. (Take heart, you teachers and professors, I had completely forgotten it, but in preparation for a sermon on anger, I called Dr. Gordon Jackson up this week, and it turns out that his recollection of the speech was quite different from my own.) He, a professional professor and Christian psychologist, was talking back then about the sources of our anger. A little seed was planted deep within my soul. It took thirty years for it to overpower me once again, but it has often helped me to see the range and history of how my anger originates. There could be forty sources of our anger. I have chosen four (By the way, they are different than his sources).

1. The first source of anger is what I will call "The Biological". As with everything we human beings are, our bodies' needs, our minds, and even souls, Father Teilhard added, are related to our

part in the evolutionary spiraling movement forward in the Time and Providence of God. Did you hear me? Everything is related to the fact that we are human. We share with other pre-human animals certain kinds of predispositions anyway, if not instincts, for the living of our lives. And, as with many other forms which dominate or motivate behavior, anger played a quite important part all along the way in the preservation of our ancient ancestors. We share "Anger" with all created beings.

Dr. Menninger, for example, wrote in one of his books of the day that he observed a deer with her little fawn. Danger came. He could see the signs of her aroused anger from his kitchen window. She then herded the young one away, and darted off into the woods for safety. Anger had helped her to survive. And Dr. Karl adds: When she got there, you can be certain she did not feel guilty for the anger, which had actually helped her and the one she loved, to survive to another generation. Are you with me?

The price of being human is that we have certain emotions and predispositions to behavior, built in you might call them, if not automatic. I call that pattern of responses the biological, a genetic pre-conditioning in our genes. We are constructed basically in such a way that anger is one of the emotions, and one of our responses. And, I say as a theologian, God put it there. And if God did, it cannot be evil. That is first: Anger comes out of the cost of being human...being alive. It has always played a useful part in determining what to do

when danger comes, and while it is highly refined in humans, it still is there.

2. I call the second source of anger "The Psychological", or it can be called "Developmental". Again, as is true with countless other activities of men and women, it arises out of natural needs, as they develop in our own environment. The need to eat and drink, e.g., is also there. Just because many people overdo each or both of them is no reason why the need to eat and drink is wrong. We have fears which protect us from danger. We need love to keep us alive and growing, even if the need for "love" can become possessive many times, and a hindrance to our growing personality. This psychological commentary concerns the natural endowments we have, and what happens to them in the individual life. Anger arises in the world when the person or animal feels he is in danger. With human beings, the word is also danger, but because we think things through, the key word is: anger comes when we perceive we are in danger (We may not actually be). But anger arises when we feel we are in danger. Each person must determine when and why that anger comes. Some respond to every corrective word or challenge as an ultimate danger, wherein it is not. Psychologically, too, it can happen over the course of a lifetime. Most anger is related to our early childhood, that is for sure. We need love to grow and live, and when that love is denied, it creates difficulties within the soul and psyche. We go on searching for that love

forevermore. And we are angry when we feel we have not received it. What's more, feeling hurt, we pass that anger on to others, or worse (sometimes), we direct it to ourselves.

It is very curious at times to know that anger can be largely directed to the people we love the most. If a casual acquaintance disappoints me, I can fairly well dispel it in a little while. But when someone I love and need betrays me, my anger comes from a far deeper source. It becomes more complicated, too, because it seems to run across the generations. You know the Hatfields and McCoys, of course, but anger seems to be taught and caught by youngsters as they grow. There are parts of the world, e.g., where just being Jewish is enough to bring anger of other people to you. And, where we live, just being black in skin is often enough to bring anger on from some other people, anyway. And the anger sports fans feel for the other team...Isn't it absolute insanity that so many times across the world riots and death come as a result of fights at a football game, where anger is vented across religious, or national, or even city boundaries. Anger needs to have a focus. Complicating the individual psychology even further is the mass psychology of people, and families. I don't have time to go into great detail, but first there is the biological necessity. Anger plays its historical evolutionary role. Secondly, the psychological development of the person determines how that anger operates.

3. Thirdly, there is what I call the "Situational Anger". It arises within the situation where I am. My native predisposition and my learned behavior converge in situations which either warrant the anger, or not. Let me give you some examples:

This morning at 6:15 I was in a little restaurant where I have coffee on the way to church. I go there so that I can have peace and quiet. About fifteen minutes into my trysting time, with my notes and cup of coffee, in stormed a young man, absolutely furious. Now the restaurant was almost empty...but where do you think he chose to sit? Right by me. Now, on Sunday morning at 6:30, I am not primarily seeking to be a friendly pastor. I am trying to awaken, and to decide what to do throughout the day. So, I was not attuned to all his needs, as I might have been some other time. He would have none of it, though. He looked right at me, snarling. (He previously snarled at the poor waitress. Anger is often misdirected. So, I finally said: "What's wrong?" That is not a question to ask, unless you want an answer...because he began to tell me. "For two and a half hours", he said, "I have been waiting for a bus on Federal Highway." The waitress chimed in: "The bus don't run on Sunday, Sir." He said: "I know that now." (Now anyone who would stay out in the rain in the dark of Sunday morning for two and a half hours waiting for a bus has another problem, that's for sure.) I sent him away a little happier. But, as we chatted, it occurred to me that his anger was quite justified. He did not have to feel guilty

for his anger. Someone in authority had told him that the bus ran by there early Sunday morning, and it did not. There are occasions, the Bible knows them too, when anger and its expression are quite normal, not only normal, but demanded. This was one. There are many others.

For example, in the Scripture, David was furious with the man who raped his daughter. Why wouldn't he be? I would be furious, too, and so would you. Moses was angry with the Israelites because they refused to trust the Lord. Jeremiah warned that he was full of the fury of the Lord. And, if you read his prophecy, he was. He was angry that the world was such an awful place. Esau was furious with Jacob, when he deprived him of his birthright. Cain was so furious when overlooked, he killed his brother. All throughout the Bible, situational anger often is present and often justified. But it is not always so.

If a child has been deprived of love for decades, you cannot expect him to grow up normally. He will grow up very angry...and that anger will creep out in different ways. Some dreadful, awful things can happen in love's deprivation of a child.

We all were taught to be nice, and we teach our children too: "Be nice, will you...don't sass your Mom...don't disobey your Dad...respect your elders...don't cause trouble...be nice!" Now, I like nice people too, for sure...but what we do in demanding that children and others be nice is to force them to suppress their

anger. Particularly if the supervising person is in authority, say a parent, or a boss, or whoever, even just larger in size...the anger goes inside, and it must come out somewhere. What you and I must learn in situational anger is to express it in such a way that the object of the anger is addressed. Anger is not wrong, unless it is excessive or misdirected.

Let me give you one further, bottom-line example. There was Jesus of Nazareth, a perfect man. He never sinned at all. One day, the Bible says, he went into the Temple area and he got angry. Next it says: He prepared a whip of cords (what an awful whip that was), but it seems to be saying that he did not lose his temper in a sudden outburst. He was not a raving lunatic for a moment, and then felt sorry afterwards. He addressed the problem with his response. He could not stand those who used the church for selfish gain. So he took his whip, and he prepared it, taking time to address the anger. And like Dr. Karl's doe, who went into the woods, you can be sure Jesus Christ never felt guilty afterward. The anger was justified and directed.

When change comes to a church, or in society, someone gets angry. Angry enough to say: "I will not tolerate this!" Whatever. But what also must happen is that the person(s) must stay angry. They must persist in saying: "We will not tolerate a society where drugs are on the rampage. We will not tolerate immorality. We will not tolerate abuse to children or to women. We will not ever tolerate another war upon this earth..."

Whatever, you fill in the blanks. You get angry, you take what is a basic predisposition, which is learned along the way, and apply it to the situation, just as Jesus Christ. He was furious with the hypocrites. It made him angry that people would pretend to be his friends, who were not...and he told them so. Situational anger which belongs is that which is appropriate and focused.

4. Fourthly, I call it "Theologian Anger". Normally this has to do with an anger toward the God who made the earth and heaven, sometimes directly said, often indirectly. In the Bible, the prophets express their anger with the Lord, because the world was not the place it should have been. Job complains, and David, even Jesus. God replies that some day we will know in full what we now know in part. But His people are still angry, often with themselves, or the circumstances, but also with their God.

The Universe, for many, promises more than it delivers. The Church and parents make unrealistic promises, too. Often life deals it out with terrifying power. When a severely handicapped child comes to a home, it can make the parents angry. When the wanton, senseless murder of a young teen takes place, it makes me horribly angry. When you give all you can, and no one responds or appreciates it, it makes you angry. When you come to realize that your highest goals and fondest dreams will not come true, there is a source of anger towards God, and the world He made, etc.etc.

That anger, too, can be focused on important forward positive ventures, as it often has been. Mother Teresa, Martin Luther King, General Booth, Winston Churchill, etc., etc., all began with anger toward the inequities and unfairness of the earth. Some years ago a mother, whose child was killed by a drunken driver, formed a nationwide organization of Mothers Against Drunk Driving. She was angry, because some lunatic would drive while he was drunk, and their results have benefited the world around.

So, Christian friends, I ask you to take your righteous indignation and apply it, not against your family, not against your loved ones, or your friends, not against your God, not against yourself. Focus it on the sources of the anger. And who knows, we might change the world.

We have offered the four sources of anger: biological, psychological, situational, and theological. We need to reach, as promised, the end with the four ways in which we settle them. For the biological, which is part of what we are, I say: Accept it. For the psychological, that is the inherited, the family, the situations we are in, I say: Express it. For the situational, I say: Focus it. And to the theological, since that means it belongs to God, I say: Surrender it. Christ can heal us all of our failures and foibles, even of our anger, if we surrender it to Him. Did you get it? I hope so.

There is one grand way to summarize it all: Please join me in the Serenity Prayer.

"God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; the courage to change the things I can; and the wisdom to know the difference. Amen."

Prayer: God, take hold of us and give us that serenity within, that we may have peace; and having it, resolve the problems of our anger, and then to solve the problems of your world. In Jesus Christ, our Lord. For now and evermore. Amen.