“You’re Not the Boss of Me!—Anger.”

Getting ready for this message today on anger, I asked some of our staff about a time when they got angry and lost it. Pastor Rick, our CJ campus pastor, said that he was working on a project inside his house and hit his finger with a hammer and went outside and threw the hammer as far as he could into the back yard. As if it was the hammer’s fault!

Caleb Paxton said that when he was a kid he had a Gameboy and was playing a tennis game on it that he just could not win. He got so angry that he hit the Gameboy on his forehead and broke it, and then kept beating it on his head until he destroyed it! Then he hid it from his mom because he was so embarrassed.

Pastor Trey said one day in basketball practice they were running zippers and he didn’t make the timer which made everybody have to run more. So, he punched the wall and broke his hand and was out for 6 weeks.

Years ago, I was speaking at a big class here at Saint Paul’s one evening that I had spent weeks getting ready for. I was just getting over a cold. While I was teaching, I got this tickle in my throat and I started coughing and could not stop coughing. I couldn’t speak at all! I had to ask one of the people taking the class to come up and read my notes. I went into the lobby and kept coughing. I finally just went home, coughing all the way and getting angrier and angrier. I got a cup out of the cupboard and the cupboard door wouldn’t close all the way, so I slammed it. That felt so good that I slammed it again. Then again. Then harder and harder…until I broke it off its hinges! Then I took it to my workbench and spent the next hour fixing it before Janet got home!

These are all just little examples of what can happen when we get angry. But if anger takes over in our lives, we can go from throwing hammers and trashing Gameboys and cupboard doors, to crashing a car, destroying a home, assaulting someone, rioting, looting, etc. When anger becomes the boss of us, we can very quickly end up destroying something or someone we love, or destroying something we hate and paying the price.

We’re in episode 4 of this series called “You’re not the boss of me!” And the subtitle says it all, “How to say ‘no’ to the emotions that compete for control.” We’re learning to say, “Guilt, shame, envy, you’re not the boss of me!” And today we’re saying it to anger. “Anger, you are not the boss of me!”

According to the Bible there’s a way to express anger constructively, but it’s not easy. The writer of Proverbs wrote, “One who is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and one whose temper is controlled is better than one who captures a city.” (Proverbs 16:32). The writer’s implying that sometimes it takes more strength and courage to control our emotions than it does to capture a fortified city!

I’m sure you know this next question is coming. Have you lost your temper lately? Have you screamed irrationally at your kids…maybe even hit them? Have you left your wife or husband trembling from your words? Are you the kind of person who unleashes on the server at the restaurant if he or she makes a mistake? Do you find yourself honking your horn and giving out the one-finger-salute when you get caught in traffic? Have family celebrations or holidays been ruined because you’ve lost your temper? Do you find yourself enraged by the politics of our time, saying things, posting things out of that rage?

Proverbs is telling us that controlling our anger is better than being a mighty war hero who can capture cities. When we control our anger, good things can happen. But when we let anger be the boss of us, it will run and ruin our lives, our communities, our country, our souls.

We don’t know for sure why, but some of us have shorter anger-fuses than others. We don’t know why some people get violent when they get angry and others stuff it down inside. One thing we can know for sure, is that God created us with the capacity for anger. In fact, our scriptures tell us that sometimes God gets angry, and God gets angry because God cares. When we see God getting angry it’s always about sin and injustice. Psalm 30 says that God’s “anger lasts only a moment, but God’s favor lasts a life time.” (Psalm 30:5). Over and over the Bible repeats what Psalm 145 says, “The LORD is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love.” (Psalm 145:8).

So yes, God gets angry because God cares. But God’s anger is never the end of the story and it only lasts for a little while, because God’s love goes way beyond his anger. Since we’re made in God’s image, we’ve got that same built-in capacity to experience anger, especially when we know that we only get angry...
about things we care about. Our anger, when we channel it in the right ways, can energize us to take actions that are good and right.

In fact, some of the best things Christians have ever done were prompted by anger. There have been times when I’ve gotten so angry at myself because I’ve repeated mistakes or failures or sin that my anger at myself helped me to do what I needed to do to make a change.

A lot of Christians have gotten so angry over injustices they’ve seen around them that their anger led them to start new ministries to support others. The civil rights movement, workers’ rights, women’s rights. Christians have gotten angry and were able to change some things.

This kind of anger is not a problem. The problem is that a lot of times we don’t know how to channel our anger productively and it turns into aggression and violence. Jesus took a hard stand against violence. If somebody strikes you on one cheek, you turn the other cheek to them rather than strike back. You forgive the person who wrongs you not 7 times, but 70 times 7 times. Jesus went to the cross humbly and showed us the way of non-violence. We saw Jesus get angry and get physical once when he drove the money-changers out of the Temple, because they were taking advantage of poor religious pilgrims. It was an issue of justice. It was an issue of those money-changers disgracing a holy place, a place that represented his Father’s home. It was not an out-of-control rage.

The problem is that very few of us have ever really been taught how to manage our feelings of anger, so we deal with them in one of two ways. Either we bottle them up or we spew them out.

Bottlers tend to say that they don’t ever get upset by the hurts, disappointments, and frustrations of life. They may even take pride in the fact that they never get angry. A lot of bottlers believe that anger is a bad thing and needs to be shoved down, bottled and buried. They think they are doing the God-honoring thing…they’re also convinced that this will work. The problem is, it doesn’t work!

You see, bottling our anger and burying it is a lot like burying toxic waste. We put this toxic poison in canisters and bury it underground just outside the city limits. Everybody thinks the problem is gone. But later, people in the city start to get sick, and growing tails, and extra eyes, and they trace it back to those buried canisters of poison.

Listen, bottled-up anger always leaks, and when it does it poisons our bodies in the form of headaches, stomach problems and sleep disorders. It poisons our minds in the form of distorted thinking, irrationality, cynicism, hopelessness, depression. All these internal physical and mental symptoms won’t stay inside for very long. They’ll start to show on the outside and we’ll get short tempers and bad moods that end up hurting our relationships with everybody—coworkers, friends, neighbors, but especially family members. If we bottle up our anger and bury it, it always, always leaks and somebody is going to suffer. Bottling it up is still letting it be the boss of us.

The opposite of a bottler is a spewer. Spewers don’t have any problem at all in showing their anger. They just let it fly. If they have to slam the door, kick the dog, curse their spouse, or even God, in order to let off steam, they’ll do it. It doesn’t matter if they leave a trail of bruised people in their wake.

The writer of Proverbs knew how much damage a spewer can do. That’s why he wrote, “Make no friends with those given to anger, and do not associate with hotheads, or you may learn their ways and entangle yourself in a trap.” (Proverbs 22:24-25). This kind of spewing can rub off on us and start a chain reaction of violence. That’s why Proverbs tells us that, “A fool gives full vent to his anger, but the wise one quietly mulls it over.” (Proverbs 29:11). Spewing and bottling is dangerous business. But there is another way. Let’s talk about God’s way to manage anger so that it does not become the boss of us.

First, acknowledge that you are angry. “Managing anger God’s way: 1. Acknowledge the anger.” Remember, anger isn’t good or bad, it’s simply an indicator that something isn’t right about something you care about. Anger is like the warning light on the dashboard of a car that tells us something under the hood needs attention. If we don’t pay attention to that warning, something really bad could happen. Some of us need a professional counselor to work through issues of anger. Others of us need to become better at reading the warning lights in our minds and bodies: clenched jaws, increased heart-rate, racing thoughts, heat under your collar.
Anger experts say you want to keep anger in your pre-frontal cortex of your brain—that’s where you think and process. If you let anger get into the limbic part of your brain that’s when we get aggressive verbally or physically because that’s our ancient fight or flight part of our brain. Some people call that part of our brain lizard brain, because it’s reactionary rather than reasonable. Recognizing anger and keeping it in our reasoning center is key. Then we’re able to answer the “Why?” questions.

That’s the second step in managing anger God’s way. “2. Figure out why.” There are three major reasons, or domains, for why we get angry: resources—food and money; residence—which includes not just your home, but your community, work, school and country; and relationships—which include your close family, coworkers, political party and religion.

When we feel like one of those domains of life—resource, residence or relationship—is threatened or has been taken from us, that can activate our anger. In so many ways that explains what we’re seeing in our country—the violence around racism and the violence at the Capitol. People sense that a resource, residence or relationship is under a threat. But violence is not the answer. We’re called as people of faith to remember our guidance from scripture. “‘Don’t sin by letting anger control you.’ Don’t let the sun go down while you are still angry, and don’t give the devil a foothold.” (Ephesians 4:26-27)). The devil gets a foothold when we leave the reasoning part of our brains and turn control over to the fear-based part of our brains. And you’ve heard me say it before, there are a lot of expert fear-mongers feeding us highly concentrated, fear-based information. Never has there been so much fear peddled to us 24/7, and right into the palms of our hands fueling our anger.

So continually ask yourself and continually be in conversation with people who can push back some, about what domain in your life feels threatened, and don’t live in fear. We’re going to talk about fear next week, but those who control your fear around resources, residence and relationship control you. Stay in your pre-frontal cortex, not your limbic center. Stay in the reasoning part of your brain, not your reaction part. “Don’t sin by letting anger control you.’ Don’t let the sun go down while you are still angry, and don’t give the devil a foothold.”

When we’re angry, we acknowledge it, not bottle it up or spew it out. We ask why we’re angry, and then we look at our options. “3. Look at the options.” Here are few possibilities: Once you recognize the presence of your anger, it’s vital to channel it. Anger doesn’t have to be destructive. It can be constructive. Experts advise against punching things because you can go from a pillow to a face too quickly. Instead, defuse the energy of anger. Go for a run, focus on your artwork or finish a DIY project, break something that needs to be broken! Some of the most amazing accomplishments in music, poetry and art, have been created from anger, channeled in the right way.

If you’re a follower of Jesus draw passages from the Bible about anger. Bring them out from your spiritual toolbox and let them guide you. Pray and ask God to give assistance with the crisis at hand. Prayer and meditation are great ways to stay in, or get back in, your reasoning mind. Bring to mind mature Christians who model healthy anger management and imagine how they’d handle these situations. Look at the options, pick one or two, and put them into play at that moment when you’re angry.

But how do we deal with somebody else’s anger? When you’re dealing with somebody else’s anger apply two key things. Don’t meet anger with anger. Experts say the best way to de-escalate is to face anger with calm. One author, Joe Shrand, talked about seeing a man putting an ugly sign in his front yard. He was pretty annoyed, but, as he approached the guy, he decided to calmly ask him what he was doing. The man responded defensively. But Shrand responded with a joke, which eased the tension. That led to a meaningful conversation. Shrand learned that this man – his neighbor – was having a yard sale to finally sell his wife’s belongings, three years after her death. His neighbor’s eyes welled up with tears as he talked. This man who just a few moments before had been taken this angry defensive posture. De-escalating can help people move out of aggression to connection. Showing empathy like that shows you care and builds connection which lowers the temperature. Anger does not have to be the boss. We recognize it, ask why we’re angry, then react the Jesus way.
I want to finish with this. Last week I had the chance to visit with Justin and Trisha Buerge. They were a part of Saint Paul’s until they moved last year. But they were in town and we had a cup of coffee together. It was one of the most beautiful conversations I’ve ever had. You see, right after Christmas in 2018 they were headed out to Colorado to go skiing and a big snow storm hit. They were on the interstate and traffic had slowed down to a crawl, but a semi-truck hit them from behind at full speed. Their oldest son, Jaxon, was killed, and Justin, Trisha and their youngest son, Max, were all badly injured. I led Jaxon’s funeral.

It was a tragic and horrible accident and their family will never be the same. It was a clear case of negligence on the part of the driver and the company for letting this driver on the road in the first place. Justin and Trisha had a clear case to sue and even possibly put the company out of business. They were angry, but they made a decision. They didn’t want a financial settlement. The only thing they wanted to do was to meet with the president of the company. 'Well, Trisha wanted to meet with him. Justin wasn’t sure he could do it without taking out his anger on this man.'

They set up the meeting through their attorneys and met at a neutral place. They didn’t really have a script. Their conversation unfolded and they prayed their way through it, seeking Jesus’ way, not the way of vengeance. They talked, they shared their anger, then they shared their forgiveness. Then they share the grace of God.

They said that the company’s attorney was crying openly saying, “I’ve never seen anything like this, ever. I’ve never heard of anything like this.” Their attorney was crying openly. Trisha said, “We’re doing it this way because the last thing I told my son before I left him was, ‘I'm going to love like you love, Jaxon. I’m going to love like you.’” You see, Jaxon had severe autism and lived out unconditional love, everywhere, always. He lived out the love of Jesus in miraculous ways. And Justin and Trisha are trying to live it out in miraculous ways as well.

Justin said, “After that meeting, I felt physically different. I didn’t know it was possible, but I left my anger there and found a freedom I didn’t know was possible.” Trisha said, “I knew that the devil was using this anger in me. I knew that if you give the devil a pinhole he’ll come in and destroy. And I left my anger there.” They said that if they had let that anger stay in their lives it would have consumed their family, their marriage, their souls.

Please don’t let anger be the boss of your life. If Justin and Trisha can leave their anger behind through the way of Jesus, the way of forgiveness, the way of love, in the face of the loss of their son, you can let go of your anger, can’t you? Can’t you? Even when your resources, your residence, your relationships are threatened or taken from you, you can take the path of peace, I know you can, if you choose to. I believe in you.

“‘Don’t sin by letting anger control you.’ Don’t let the sun go down while you are still angry, and don’t give the devil a foothold.” (Ephesians 4:26-27). Anger, in the name and power of Jesus, I will not let you run and ruin my life, my city, my country! Anger, I will not allow you to give Satan a foothold. Anger, you are not the boss of me! Say it with me! Anger, you are not the boss of me! And for today, that is the Good News! In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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