

2CH Sunday at 7.30

Talks from the NSW Council of Churches

Resolve that anger

Presented by Steve Cooper

Good morning! One of the big problems these days is anger. Our pace of life has become so busy, and there are so many pressures on us. Anger seems to lie just under the surface, and for many of us it doesn't take much to provoke our anger.

I spend a fair bit of time with police, since I serve as a volunteer police chaplain. I've discovered that much of what the police deal with arises due to anger. A car driver has become angry, leading to an accident. A spouse or parent has become angry, leading to violence or abuse in the home. A teenager is angry with society, leading to break-and-enter stealing.

For all of us, anger can be a real problem. This morning let's consider what **Jesus** had to say. He had some answers to help us deal with our anger.

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Jesus had a lot to say about character. In the talk by Jesus we call 'The Sermon on the Mount', Jesus showed that he expects all who follow him to be growing in character. The Sermon on the Mount is recorded in Matthew's Gospel, chapters 5-7.

One of the aspects of character Jesus deals with is anger. He expected his disciples to deal with their anger in a different way from the very religious Jewish scribes. These scribes seized on commands like 'Do not murder' (Ex 20:13) and said as long as you don't do the action of murder you can hate people as much as you like. Jesus demands a more radical approach to behaviour. God is not only interested in our actions, says Jesus, but he probes our motives and thoughts. Jesus wants us to cultivate a relationship with God of love and obedience. God is not pleased when we don't recognize wrong attitudes like anger, when we don't deal with anger and we let it get out of control.

Jesus said: 'But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, 'Raca' (a term of angry contempt, like calling someone an 'idiot'), is answerable to the Sanhedrin. And anyone who says 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of destruction.' (Matt 5:22)

Anger is a problem for all of us. When someone hurts us or mistreats us, we flare up with anger. We want to take revenge, to get even. That anger can smoulder, so that we nurse our bitterness and refuse to deal with our grudge. Anger can fester for years, decades, even centuries. Anger can happen so easily in marriage, in families, in neighbourhoods, in workplaces, between ethnic groups. I remember how disappointed I was with a great-aunt who informed me she had not spoken to her neighbour, a widow like her, for 30 years. I asked why, and she said, with anger and hatred in her voice: 'Because she's Catholic, and I'm Methodist!'

Jesus knew this angry world, too. Romans insulted Jews, Samaritans attacked Jews, Jews fought back, different Jewish parties insulted and attacked each other. Is this what human life was meant to be like? Jesus says no!

We all know how destructive anger can be. People take their public anger back into the home. The worker whose boss has shouted at him goes back to his own office and shouts at the secretary. The secretary goes home and shouts at the children. The children shout at the cat. If part of human maturity is learning how to recognize your anger, and deal with it before it gets out of control, we have to conclude that most of us are not very mature.

Let's think some more about Jesus' solution for anger after this song.

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This morning we're grappling with how we can deal with anger. The first instance in the Bible story about a person with an anger problem was Cain (Gen 4). Cain was 'very angry' that his offering to God was not acceptable. The Lord said to Cain: 'Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? ... If you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it.' (Gen 4:6-7) Sadly, Cain did not deal with his anger. He nursed it and eventually killed his brother Abel. This led to the Lord's rebuke and just punishment (Gen 4:10-12).

How do we deal with anger that is smouldering inside us? In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus offers two remarkably specific and practical commands. **Be reconciled; make friends.** How simple that is – and yet how hugely difficult and costly! It will almost certainly involve climbing down from the high pedestal on which we've placed ourselves, abandoning our position of superiority over the person we're angry with. But genuine humans don't live on pedestals; they have their feet on the ground, on a level with everyone else.

In particular – and this is very striking – reconciliation takes precedence even over worship. Jesus says: 'Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First, go and be reconciled with that person; then come and offer your gift.' (Matt 5:23-24)

Jesus imagines someone getting all the way to the Temple courtyard, buying a sacrificial animal on the way, suddenly remembering some relationship that has gone wrong (broken). That often happens in worship, when approaching the presence of the loving and holy God. The scene then becomes almost comic. It takes about three days to get back to Galilee, where most of Jesus' hearers lived. He cannot seriously have imagined an anxious worshipper leaving a live animal sitting there in the Temple courts for a week while they scurried back home, apologized to the offended person, and then returned to Jerusalem. As so often in his teaching, Jesus is using a graphic illustration to make a point. The point is that we must live, day by day, in such a way that when you come to worship there is no anger between you and your neighbour, your sister, your brother. Jesus elsewhere emphasised that if we seek God's forgiveness we must have a forgiving attitude to other people. Remember the part of the Lord's Prayer: 'Forgive us our debts, as we have also forgiven our debtors' (Matt 6:12). We can't expect God to forgive us if we are harbouring grudges and refusing to deal with our anger toward others.

Is this demand from Jesus impossible? Jesus implies that it isn't, now that he is here to show the way.

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One of the hardest issues to deal with is our personal anger. We may live outwardly respectable lives, and people may admire our actions. But deep down inside there may be an ugly nest of bitterness, grudges, and anger that is not resolved. This morning we're considering what Jesus says about anger in the Sermon on the Mount.

Jesus presents a wide picture. He asks you to imagine that you and a neighbour are actually going before a judge to fight out your legal differences. He says: ‘Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court. Do it while you are still together on the way, or your adversary may hand you over to the judge, and the judge may hand you over to the officer, and you may be thrown into prison. Truly I tell you, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny’ (Matt 5:25-26).

Don’t even go to court, says Jesus. Sort it out beforehand, or you may end up in jail and paying every cent you have. Reconciliation is urgent. Time may be short. Don’t leave grievances unsettled. Neglected grievances can have irrevocable consequences. This advice goes way beyond lawsuits. Israel in Jesus’ day was in trouble, oppressed by pagans from outside and by rich autocrats from inside. Jesus tells us not to long for the day when God will prove us right and our enemies will be overthrown. Don’t even think like that, says Jesus. Make friends, not enemies.

All of this, of course, is impossible. The ideals of the Sermon on the Mount, including this demand to deal with anger, are so high they are impossible. That is, it’s humanly impossible until you look at Jesus. As we continue through Matthew’s story of Jesus, we discover that our natural question (of how could people possibly do what Jesus says) is eventually answered. Jesus himself refused to go the way of anger. Instead, he took the anger of his enemies within Israel, and of Israel’s own enemies, the Romans, on to himself, and died under its load.

Jesus makes stern demands, but he also tenderly offers grace, and gently offers kindness. We see this in the Sermon on the Mount itself. The beatitudes instruct us to look to God in humble dependence, mourning over our sins, longing for a relationship of love and obedience with God, receiving God’s mercy and showing mercy to others. In the Lord’s Prayer we are instructed to say: ‘Forgive us our debts ... deliver us from the evil one’. We see the ideal, we aim for it, we see how often we fall short, and we humbly plead for grace. Before the cross of Jesus we all stand on level ground. From now on reconciliation is not simply an ideal we might strive for. It is an achievement, an accomplishment, which we in turn must embody.

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I’ve been speaking today about some personal and painful issues. Anger is a topic that’s difficult for us to face. You may be often angry, and you don’t like to admit it. Or you may have been deeply hurt in the past, and your anger and resentment smoulders after all these years. Consider what Jesus says about dealing with your anger. Turn in prayer to the Lord, who is ‘compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love’ (Psalm 103:8).

‘Father God, we admit before you our anger. Forgive us for our failure to deal with our anger. Help us look to Jesus, and see in him your mercy and strength to help us forgive others, show love, and be agents of your peace. In the name of Jesus, Amen.’