

Defusing your anger” — # 1 in “The Greatest Sermon in History”

Message for Sunday, May 22, 2016
by Bruce Fraser

Scripture: Matthew 5:21-26

Children’s Message: based on Proverbs 29:11
“Stupid people express their anger openly, but sensible people are patient and hold it back.”

Have you ever been to the doctor for a check-up, and they test your reflexes? They take a little hammer and knock on your knee to see if your legs kicks out. You haven’t?! Well, I have a real treat for you today? We can do that right here!

Who would like to be the doctor? We’ll first get you dressed in your white coat. And we’ll hang a stethoscope around your neck. There! Now you look just like a doctor. And here’s something you can use to test the reflex.

Now who would like to be the patient? Sit on the edge of the seat, so your leg is hanging loose, straight down. Now, Doctor *Name*, you tap his/her knee right here, and we’ll see what happens. (Let some others try, too, if they like.)

A reflex is really interesting. The way our body normally works is like this: Your nose sends a message to the brain, “I’m itchy.” Then your brain sends a message to your elbow, “Elbow, bend up so the hand raises up in the air to scratch your nose.” Try it. Good! Then the brain says, “Elbow, bend down so that hand goes back down.” So that’s how our body normally works. The brain tells the different parts of the body what to do.

A reflex is different. The knee feels something hit it, and it *instantly* responds. It doesn’t wait for a message from the brain telling it what to do. Reflexes are important: if you accidentally put your hand on a hot stove without looking, it will instantly pull back. You’ll still get burned, but it won’t be as bad as if you had to wait for your brain to tell your hand to pull back. So reflexes are good!

But not always! Let’s imagine someone says something mean to you. “Ha ha! You look so stupid!” You get angry, and you answer back the first thing that pops into your mind, “Well, you

don’t just *look* stupid; you *are* stupid!” Now the other person is angry, too, and you’ve got a fight on your hands.

That was acting by reflex. You just opened your mouth without thinking.

When we are angry, acting by reflex is not good. It will usually make things worse.

Here’s what God teaches us in the Bible:

Proverbs 29:11, Today’s English Version:
Stupid people express their anger openly, but sensible people are patient and hold it back.

Hold back your anger. Don’t just blurt something out. Be patient. Wait. Think before you speak.

Have you ever heard the advice, “When you are angry, count to ten before responding”? That idea is actually based on what the Bible teaches! And when you get really angry, count to a hundred!

When you’ve had a chance to think wisely about the situation, then you can respond.

Sermon “Defusing your anger” — # 1 in “The Greatest Sermon in History”

The Greatest Sermon in History is the teaching given by Jesus Christ as recorded in Matthew chapters 5-7, commonly called “The Sermon on the Mount.” This series of message aims to apply Jesus’ timeless truths to the situations that people face today.

1) Anger is a feeling; feelings are normal

A little girl was scowling at a bulldog. Her mother walked into the room and scolded her for being so rude. “Well, he started it!” the girl explained. That’s funny. Most of the time, though, anger is no laughing matter.

Anger is a lot like fire. It doesn’t take much to get it going; it grows by leaps and bounds when we feed it; and the searing flames can ruin everything around.

Anger is very common. I don’t need to explain what I mean when I’m talking about feeling angry: you’ve been there, you know what I’m talking about. Somebody does something wrong or mean. You know the surge of adrenaline in your body as

you get ready to fight back; the blood rushing to your face, turning it red; the heart pumping faster and the blood pressure going up. We all know what this feels like.

Now stop and think about what I just said:

- ◆ the surge of adrenaline
- ◆ the face turning red
- ◆ the heart pumping faster.

All of these are automatic reactions in our body. We have no control over them. Feeling angry is a normal, automatic reaction in the human body, just like any other feeling: feeling sad when someone dies, feeling happy when the sun shines, feeling afraid when danger approaches. With each of these feelings come corresponding physical and chemical changes in our bodies. Again, all of this is automatic, and we have no control over it.

2) We are responsible for what we do with anger

What we *do* have control over — and are responsible for — is how we respond to these feelings, what we do with them. When Jesus is commanding us here to not be angry, I think he is talking about how we respond, not the feeling itself:

Matthew 5:21-22, New International Version:

“You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment.”

Some people let their anger control them, instead of the other way around. A woman once apologized for her frequent flare-ups by telling the preacher Billy Sunday, “Yes, I have a bad temper, but it’s always over in a minute.” “So is a shotgun blast!” replied Sunday. “But look at the damage it can do in just a split second!”

Some people dwell on their anger, feeding it, encouraging the fire to grow bigger and hotter, until it explodes. In that case, anger is like a bomb ticking away, ready to explode. What we need is to learn how to drown the fire, and defuse the bomb. That’s why I’ve called this message “Defusing Your Anger.”

3) Next Steps: How to defuse anger

a) Recognize the feeling

Jesus spoke plainly about anger. It’s real. It happens. So when it happens to us, don’t pretend that it’s not there. If you’re at home and you smell smoke, you look for a fire. You don’t say, “Oh, it’s nothing to worry about.” When you’re angry, deal with it — like the fire, before it gets out of control.

Some people hold their anger in. They smolder and seethe inside, but deny it on the outside. Someone else comes along and asks, “Are you upset about something?” “Of course not!” they snap back. These people are among the hardest to deal with, because they’re not being honest with you or themselves.

b) Don’t let anger have power over you

Later on in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus gives a specific command about controlling our anger:

Matthew 5:39, New International Version:

“If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.”

That takes self-control. It’s another example of not responding by reflex.

John Selwyn was a prize winning boxer, who became a missionary, spending his life building up the Church in the South Pacific. In one of the congregations was a man who was leading an immoral life, and Selwyn gave him a firm but loving rebuke. The man was outraged, and punched him violently in the face.

Selwyn merely folded his arms and humbly looked into the man’s blazing eyes. With his boxing skill and powerful rippling muscles, he could easily have knocked out his attacker. Instead, he turned the other cheek and waited calmly to be hit a second time. This was too much for the man to handle, who became greatly ashamed and fled into the jungle.

Years afterward, the man surrendered his life to Jesus, and gave his testimony before the church. It was customary at that time for a new believer to choose a new name for himself. When asked if he wished to follow this practice, he replied without hesitation, “Yes, call me John Selwyn! He’s the one who taught me what Jesus Christ is really like!”

c) Deal with anger, rather than dwelling on it

Ephesians 4:26, Today's English Version:

If you become angry, do not let your anger lead you into sin, and do not stay angry all day.

Again: it is not a sin to be angry. The sin comes in how we respond to the anger. Control the anger, rather than let it control you. Once you've calmed down (count to ten), then you can deal with the situation.

But don't stay angry. If we feed the anger by dwelling on it, getting madder and madder, then we have sinned.

Suppose you scrape your arm on something. If you wash it to get rid of germs, then leave it alone, it will look after itself and heal in a week or two. But what will happen if you keep peeling the scab off? It will never heal, and in fact may get infected. That's a picture of what happens when you mentally and emotionally keep re-living the incident that made you angry.

d) Don't jump to conclusions

James 1:19-20, New Revised Standard Version:

You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God's righteousness.

Go slow. Find out the facts, not just the gossip. Don't jump to conclusions. Put yourself in the other person's shoes. This is so obvious, it hardly needs to be said. But when people are listening to their anger, they are not thinking clearly. It's all part of the process of how we handle our anger.

e) Seek reconciliation - go immediately to the person with whom we have the dispute

Matthew 5:23-24, New Revised Standard Version:

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 to your brother or sister; then come and offer your gift.

Go and speak directly to the person you're angry at. This is so important! Jesus gives the example of a person walking out of a worship service because they need to first go and make up with someone.

The only way to get past the gossip, the misunderstanding, and the questions, is to go and see that person.

There is perhaps one time when we should wait before going to see someone: when the anger has just started, and we're boiling mad. Take some time first to cool off.

There's a story of a young man who had been cruelly insulted by a co-worker. Full of anger, he determined to go at once and demand an apology. A wise gentleman laid his hand on his shoulder and said quietly, "Son, let me give you a word of advice. An insult is like mud: it will brush off much better when it is dry! Wait until you both have cooled off, and then the thing can probably be settled quickly. If you go now, you'll quarrel even more."

Sometimes we think, "Why should I go to see her? She started this; she should come to me!" Friends, forget it. It's not worth it. Don't let our pride destroy the little that's left of a relationship.

f) Speak softly

Proverbs 15:1, New American Standard Bible:

A soft answer turns away wrath, but harsh words stir up anger.

Yes, go and see the person we're angry with. Yes, tell him or her we're angry. But don't make it even worse.

One of the most effective ways to do this is to use what counsellors call an "I statement." A "I statement" focuses on how *I* feel, rather than what *you* did.

A typical encounter goes like this:

Wife: You never pay any attention to me anymore.

Husband: What do you *mean* I don't pay any attention to you anymore? What about Saturday night? Remember Saturday night? It doesn't seem to mean a thing to you that I leave work early to take you to that theatre thing, when I've got a big lawsuit hanging over my head at work. Honestly, Helen, I don't know what it would

take to make you happy. No matter what I do, you complain.

Why is he so angry in his response? Because she attacked him. We all react like that whenever someone says “You never...” or “you always....”

She could say the same message, without waving a red flag, by describing her feelings.

Wife: You know, I’m feeling lonely and neglected these days.

We can even get away with feelings of bitter anger, so long as we avoid saying, “You make me so mad when you...” Take out the “you”, and talk about how “I” feel. Example:

Mother: Tom, I’m so mad at you I could hit the wall! I told you that I had to have the car back at 7:30 so I could get to my meeting, and here it’s almost 8:00. Boy, does that get to me! The longer you were gone, the more I boiled inside!

g) Seek forgiveness — for ourselves as well as the person we’re angry with

Mark 11:25, Today’s English Version:

But when you are praying, first forgive anything you may have against anyone, so that your Father in heaven will forgive your sins.

It’s clear that Jesus teaches us to forgive others, even our enemies. It’s also common sense: it would be impossible to have any kind of polite relationship — let alone friendship — with someone we feel bitter towards.

But why seek forgiveness for ourselves? Simply this: anger is a sword with a blade at both ends. We may hurt the other person with one end, but we injure ourselves just as much, if not more.

We may find that we have trouble praying, until our anger is dealt with. Jesus tells us that when we pray, the first thing we do is to forgive others. Indeed, if we don’t, then our heavenly Father will not forgive us for our sins!

h) After it’s dealt with, let it go

Finally, after we’ve dealt with our anger, then drop it. Leave it behind. Don’t carry any more heavy

burdens than we need to. Learn from how God deals with anger:

Psalm 30:5

For his anger lasts only a moment,
but his favour lasts a lifetime;
weeping may remain for a night,
but rejoicing comes in the morning.