

## **“Reality Christianity” Preaching Series: Part 3 – “The Reality of Anger”**

**Mark 3:1-6**

**Third Sunday after Epiphany: January 24, 2010**

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What exactly is anger? A dictionary definition is “a strong emotion; a feeling that is oriented toward some real or supposed grievance.”

As a young, unknown, brown-skinned lawyer traveling in South Africa on business, Mahatma Gandhi was roughly thrown from the train because he refused to surrender his first-class ticket and move to the third-class compartment. He spent a cold, sleepless night on the railway platform. Later, he said this was the turning point of his life: for on that night, full of anger because of this personal injustice, as well as the countless injustices suffered by so many others every day in South Africa, he resolved not to rest until he had set those injustices right. On that night he conquered his anger and vowed to resist injustice, not by violence or retaliation, but through the loving power of nonviolent resistance, which elevates the consciousness of both oppressed and oppressor. Mahatma Gandhi provides a perfect example of how anger can be harnessed and used for a positive purpose. He once said:

“I have learned through bitter experience the one supreme lesson to conserve my anger, and as heat conserved is transmuted into energy, even so our anger controlled can be transmuted into a power that can move the world.”

We don’t have to be taught to be angry. It is an innate emotional response we choose to make from a very early age. Babies may throw tantrums, adolescents may sulk, parents may scream, old men may be grumpy, and old women may fuss! Anyone can be angry – at any age, in any place, at any time. There’s rage on our roads, irritability in our grocery lines, getting mad on the phone with marketing callers, screaming at the referee on the sidelines at a ball game, and simmering anger at a national level with politicians and economists. There is even anger in the pews sometimes! Christians and non-Christians, rich and poor, black and white all may get angry. Many people are angry in Haiti right now. Individuals may get angry, crowds may get angry. All people have the capability of becoming angry.

I want to suggest today that there are at least two kinds of real anger: *selfish anger* and *selfless anger*. In my experience selfish anger is usually focused on something small: like the smaller, lesser, more selfish part of myself or yourself. By selfless anger I mean anger that is not centered in self but in some large issue, concern, or big challenge that deeply affects others, especially those who have no voice or whose voice is not heard.

Our gospel lesson in Mark chapter 3 illustrates these two kinds of anger: When Jesus walked into the synagogue, he saw not only a man with a shriveled hand but also a group of Pharisees watching him and waiting for an opportunity to condemn him for healing on the Sabbath. So Jesus asked the Pharisees a very direct question: “Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or evil, to save life or to kill?” The Pharisees knew the answer to that question. But they chose not to answer it. Jesus knew what was in their hearts, and in verse 5 we read, “Jesus looked around at them in anger ...deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts.” He knew that they weren’t concerned about the man in physical distress. So Jesus said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” When the man did, it was instantly healed.

There was great rejoicing in that room. This man who had been physically challenged was made whole. He could now use his hand to fasten buttons, tie shoes, and do all the things which you and I do without ever giving it a second thought. So there was great rejoicing in that man’s heart. But there was also great anger in that room: both selfish anger and selfless anger. The Pharisees expressed selfish anger; Jesus expressed selfless anger. Let us look briefly at each form of anger in this story.

The Pharisees aren’t happy. They are angry at Jesus because he has healed the man on the Sabbath day. You can almost see the fiery darts going through the air between the Pharisees and Jesus. The Pharisees are angry at Jesus and that is easy for us to accept. After all, they had an agenda which was to entrap Jesus and find ways to bring about his demise. They were threatened by Jesus because he stood for something much larger than the Jewish Law and traditions. He regularly broke their rules and regulations – just as he was doing again on this occasion by healing on the Sabbath. They had grown to dislike Jesus because he did not hesitate to confront, admonish, and rebuke them ...always calling them to a higher allegiance ...to be part of a bigger picture, the kingdom of God.

The anger of the Pharisees was brought about because of selfishness. They weren't concerned about the man with the shriveled hand. They couldn't care less whether his hand was healed or remained shriveled. The only thing they were concerned about was their Law and traditions. Why were they concerned? Because they were the religious leaders and if their Law and traditions were ignored that placed their authority in question. They weren't concerned about the physical challenges of the man. They were only concerned about themselves. This is an example of what I am calling selfish anger.

One result of selfish anger is that it often tries to hurt the source of its anger. Notice, when the Pharisees became angry at Jesus they started conspiring with the Herodians to destroy Jesus. They wanted to hurt Jesus. There are many ways to hurt those we are angry with: we can try to harm them physically or damage their property, we can use our tongues to verbally abuse them or to spread malicious rumors about them, or we can isolate them by withdrawing our friendship from them ...by standing aloof from them. That is what happened with the Pharisees. Their anger was selfish, and in their anger they reached out to hurt Jesus who was the source of their anger.

But while the Pharisees expressed selfish anger, the same is not true of Jesus in this story. In fact, the opposite is true: Jesus expressed selfless anger. We cannot ignore Mark's record that Jesus also got angry on this occasion. Clearly, Jesus was angry and his anger was focused on the Pharisees. The fact that Jesus got angry may be hard for some of us to accept. Many of us have been taught to always picture Jesus as "meek and mild," as the tender Lamb of God, as the One who is always loving and compassionate. It is hard for us to imagine him as one who is angry.

Now please listen carefully to this next point and try to understand it unambiguously. It was okay for Jesus to be angry. His anger was all right. Not because Jesus was the one who was angry, but because the motive behind his anger was right. To begin with, it was not selfish anger. Jesus wasn't angry because the Pharisees had done something personally to him. In fact, when you study the life of Jesus you will never find him becoming angry because of something that people did personally to him. There were many opportunities for Jesus to become angry, but when personally attacked he chose not to respond with selfish

anger. What Jesus did was not a denial of the reality of anger, but rather he chose to reserve his anger for particular situations: for example, when he saw the rights of people being trampled on by those who considered themselves mighty, Jesus became angry; when he saw people being stumbling-blocks to the growth of faith of little children, Jesus became angry; when he saw the house of God being turned into a den of thieves, Jesus became angry.

I have just provided you with examples of selfless anger. Jesus became angry at the right things. He channeled and focused and directed his anger into something beautiful ...and the symbol of that beauty and sacred act that grew out of his selfless anger is found in this building ...it is positioned above the altar ...it is the Cross. The Cross of Christ is the symbol of righteous anger. It towers over the wrecks of time ...over the violence in this world, over wars we fight, over the death of innocent people we are indifferent to, and over more subtle and systemic evil that we turn a blind eye to.

It is important for us to realize today that anger can and will be a right choice when we direct our selfless anger towards making right those things that are wrong in the world, in our nation, in our community: those things that hurt and humiliate people ...those things that dehumanize and destroy people ...those things that mislead and misdirect: that don't draw people to God and God's kingdom, but drive them to spiritual despair and defeat. Those are the things that it is okay to get angry about. Perhaps it is more accurate to say that it is okay to get angry with people who are responsible for keeping spiritual roadblocks in place. Jesus did. Jesus expressed selfless anger when he encountered injustice towards and condemnation of God's people, and so should we.

May we not be afraid to choose to use selfless anger when those around us are helpless and hopeless ...when there are people who are being oppressed or burdened by laws and governments, or who are being misled by religious leaders and false teachings, or who are poor and perishing because we prefer to protect our resources rather than share them. To quote Rob Bell in his dvd entitled *Store*, "May we [you] become aware of our [your] anger. May we [you] learn to channel it, to focus it, direct it into something beautiful. And may it fuel sacred acts of healing and restoration." [Source: *Store* –NOOMA dvd #16].

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.