

Playing with Fire

Proverbs 29:8. Scoffers set a city aflame, but the wise turn away wrath.

Every year the men at our church spend the weekend together at our annual ManDown Weekend in Front Royal, VA.

On Friday night, we always have a big grill fest. And of course to do it right you have to have an nice hot fire. One year it was a bit rainy, so a few of us participated in a group project of getting the large grill fire going in the light rain. If you have ever seen three men try to do any project together you do not need an explanation. The fire got started a little slow, as they often do, so I really felt like we needed to just give it some help with some lighter fluid and the guys standing around were giving me a bit of a hard time about how much I enjoyed seeing the flames burst into action. Fire is good for grilling.

But I just have to say. Although under these specific, careful conditions it can work miracles on some food. In most situations it becomes an uncontrollable destructive force...I am pretty aware of it.

In the spring of 2009, while we were living in Iceland we got a phone call one morning that the house we still owned in Stafford, VA had caught fire. After several days it became clear the fire was started by some cigarettes that had been carelessly stuffed in a plastic bottle and shoved under a couch in the basement where they smoldered and engulfed the couch in flames.

I know what you are thinking, "Who would be so foolish to let burning cigarettes lay around the house?" and you would be right to think that. Capture that thought and you have a sense of the message of Proverbs on anger...We can see the foolishness of stuffing cigarettes under the couch yet for many of us throughout the rooms of our life we have batches of kindling soaked with lighter fluid laying around in our unchecked and excused anger. "Who would be so foolish not to guard themselves from such destruction?"

What does Proverbs tell us about the danger of anger?

1. Proverbs never associates anger with the wise, only scoffers and fools.

Proverbs 14:29. Whoever is slow to anger has great understanding, but he who has a hasty temper exalts folly.

Proverbs 29:8. Scoffers set a city aflame, but the wise turn away wrath.

Proverbs 29:11. A fool gives full vent to his spirit, but a wise man quietly holds it back

If you are like me when you were first confronted with some the realities of your anger you may have chalked it up to your personality. I think it is possible some of you have may have even already had the thought during this sermon. I just have an intense personality. Or I get passionate about things because I care. We are so tempted to make our short temper a feature of our personality, but let me just say it [Anger] is less a feature of our personality and more often a feature of our immaturity.

2. Proverbs treats anger like a contagious disease. Maybe a better way of saying it is to say. In Proverbs, “The angry word is never the last word”.

Proverbs 15:1. A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.

Proverbs 30:33. For pressing milk produces curds, pressing the nose produces blood, and pressing anger produces strife.

Proverbs 15:18. A hot-tempered man stirs up strife, but he who is slow to anger quiets contention.

Proverbs 20:3. It is an honor for a man to keep aloof from strife, but every fool will be quarreling.

Proverbs 29:22. A man of wrath stirs up strife, and one given to anger causes much transgression.

Some of you are thinking, wait a moment. I cannot be faulted for causing other people to sin. Well in one sense it is absolutely true, that each individual is responsible for the way they respond to situations. But he is not talking about that here. He is talking about what you are responsible for. And you may not be directly responsible but in proverbs your anger is a practical accessory to the sin of others and you are responsible for laying the trap even if they made the choice to step in it.

Proverbs 22:24. Make no friendship with a man given to anger, nor go with a wrathful man, lest you learn his ways and entangle yourself in a snare.

Some of you are thinking. Too late, we got married. Well think about this insight then. Our anger lays repeated snares such that some of you are walking around in a booby-trapped house and the danger is not only that you are going to step in the wrong spot and experience the anger of your spouse. It's that in doing so you face the temptation of your own anger, which may have laid the previous snare and most certainly will lay the next one.

3. Proverbs warns that destruction is unavoidable for one who gives way to anger.

Proverbs 25:28. A man without self-control is like a city broken into and left without walls.

The person who lacks self-control and gives way to anger forfeits the ability to protect their life from destructive forces. Anger opens the life to all sorts of sin, and even in several places in the New Testament is the dangerous seed that produces murder.

Proverbs 19:19. A man of great wrath will pay the penalty, for if you deliver him, you will only have to do it again.

This proverb highlights the futility of trying to rescue an angry person from the consequences of their anger. It will be endless with each opportunity unleashing a new chain of events that you will not be able to undo. The passage speaks to the deliverer, but needs to be heard by those of us who tolerate their anger. You do not get to choose the consequences. There is no telling where and when we will feel them, but by then it will be too late to relieve ourselves of their practical destruction.

The eventual, and most chilling warning in Proverbs about anger is found in

Proverbs 18:19. A brother offended is more unyielding than a strong city, and quarreling is like the bars of a castle.

The practical fruit of an angry life is ultimately a self-inflicted loneliness and separation. Quarreling produces a culture around us where, not only will people not be able to get in and care for us, they eventually won't even want to. Examine whether that is the future you are headed to. A life alone, because you are the only person you don't argue with.

What should we do?

Well the philosopher Seneca summarizes a great deal of the wisdom of proverbs when he said, "The greatest remedy for anger is delay."

Remove the permission.

Proverbs 29:11. A fool gives full vent to his spirit, but a wise man quietly holds it back.

We all experience the sting of emotion and feel the initial impulse of anger when we perceive we have been slighted. But we must remove the permission to act in the situation and respond to the person until we have

Examine when you are offended.

Proverbs 19:11. Good sense makes one slow to anger, and it is his glory to overlook an offense.

Someone who quickly responds to offenses cannot overlook them and forfeits the honor of overlooking it.

Rule the rebellion with wisdom.

Proverbs 16:32. Whoever is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and he who rules his spirit than he who takes a city.

Look to Christ - Over and over again we are reminded that God has been slow to anger with us.

The Prophets remind us.

Joel 2:13. Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful, *slow to anger*, and abounding in steadfast love;

Jonah 4:2. That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, *slow to anger* and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster.

The Psalmist celebrates it

Psalms 145:8-9. The LORD is gracious and merciful, *slow to anger* and abounding in steadfast love. The LORD is good to all, and his mercy is over all that he has made.

Jesus demonstrated it. Though we see him angry on a few occasions, it is always in regards to God's dishonor as a result of sin and never for a personal offense.

If God in his infinite wisdom has been slow to anger, we with our limitation and foolishness should put it off altogether. We should not wield it like a weapon but handle it with care like a dangerous threat to our lives.

After all, it is the kindness and patience of God to pass over our sins and not deal with us in His anger that has led to our Salvation.

"for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus." (Romans 3:23-26 ESV)