

## Ephesians 4:26-27

### Introduction

Last week, Paul began spelling out some specifics of what it actually looks like to be putting off the old man, and putting on *the new man* – the one who has *already* been created in the likeness of God in righteousness and holiness of the truth. Paul began spelling out some of the *specific ways* that we have *learned Christ*, and heard *Him*, and been taught *in Him*. The “specifics” *continue* to live and breathe in the context of the *Gospel*. This is so important. We can easily emphasize the “do’s” and “don’ts” especially as parents with our children. We can easily quote these verses about lying, and anger, and stealing, etc., but we must always quote them in such a way that they’re leading *to*, or flowing *from* the promise, and hope, and joy of the Gospel. In other words, the condemning power of the law is always meant to lead us to God’s lavish mercy and grace. And the transforming power of God’s grace leads us, in turn, to joyful and thankful obedience to His law. We must not only teach this to our children by our words, but by our lives. So last week we looked at Ephesians 4:25.

**Put OFF:** Therefore, having put off the lie,  
**Put ON:** *speak truth*—each of you—with his neighbor,  
**Gospel reason:** because we are members of one another.

This week, we’ll look at verses 26-27.

**Put OFF:** *Be angry and do not sin; do not* let the sun go down on your provocation,  
**Gospel reason:** *nor give place* to the devil.

### I. “Be angry and do not sin”

The *main* point here is not that we *must* be angry. The main point is that we must *not sin* in our anger. But I wonder if some people overemphasize this. When Paul says “be angry” it is actually an imperative (it’s in the Greek *form* of a command), which at least *assumes* that anger is not always a sin. In fact, I think it assumes more than that. I think it assumes that at times we *will* be angry and *should rightly* be angry. Braune writes: “Affirmed of God more than *three hundred times*, [anger] cannot be wrong of itself in man who is created after the image of God.” “*Be angry*,” Paul says, “and *do not sin*.” In other words, there *must* be such a thing as “righteous anger” not just in the case of God, or of God incarnate, but also in our own lives.

One commentator says that this verse was “not meant to encourage speculation about what types of anger might be permissible.” But, in fact, we don’t *need* to “speculate” because the Scriptures provide us with answers. So it’s a good and healthy thing for us to ask: “When is anger not a sin?” “*Be angry... and do not sin*.” Living over 350 years ago, Fergusson puts it like this: “Anger... become[s] good or evil, according to the grounds, causes, objects, and ends of it.” We all know the *feeling* of anger. Nothing is ever more unmistakable. So whenever we have that feeling we need to immediately ask ourselves: What is the *true reason* for my anger? And what is the *true goal or end* of my anger? These two questions will tell us very clearly whether our anger is “good” or “evil.” The Psalmist writes:

- ✓ Psalm 119:53 — Hot indignation seizes me because of the wicked, *who forsake your law*.

What's the reason for his anger? The reason for his anger is the forsaking of God's law, and the despising of God's glory. The ultimate reason for the Psalmist's anger was not a personal offense against himself (though this was often the case), but an offense against *God*, the Creator and Ruler of the world, and the Savior of His people. How often is this really the true reason for our own anger? Hendriksen writes: "The age in which we are living could use a little more 'righteous indignation.'" But how often do we confuse "righteous indignation" with "*self*-righteous indignation"? How can we know if our anger is really a righteous response to the forsaking of God's law? Well, first of all and most importantly, this kind of anger over sin in others is always accompanied by genuine *tears*. A little later on in the same chapter, the Psalmist writes:

- ✓ Psalm 119:136 [NASB] — My eyes shed streams of water, because they do not keep Your law.

Genuine "righteous anger" is always accompanied by genuine "righteous tears" (2 Cor. 7:11). Fergusson is right when he says: "It is sometimes and in some cases a necessary duty for a Christian to be angry." But how often have we really known a "righteous anger," – the kind that's always accompanied by "righteous tears"? Another way to know if the *true reason* for our anger is the forsaking of God's law and the despising of God's glory is to ask ourselves if we've had an equal feeling of this same anger and grief in response to the sin in our *own* lives. If we haven't known this same feeling of anger directed towards our own sin (of which we should be more aware than anything else), then the words of Jesus in Matthew 7 clearly apply:

- ✓ Matthew 7:5 — You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye.

Think of the example of Jesus:

- ✓ John 2:15, 17 — And making a whip of cords, he drove them all out of the temple, with the sheep and oxen. And he poured out the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables... His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me."

We remember first of all that Jesus had the authority to do this, because the temple was the house of His own Father, and He Himself was the fulfillment of the temple. But what was the reason for Jesus' anger? The reason for His anger was zeal for God's house and a true passion for God's honor and glory. The reason for Jesus' anger was not a personal offense against himself, but an offense against *God*, the Creator and Ruler of the world, and the Savior of His people. And just like with the Psalmist, we are right to assume that Jesus' burning anger was accompanied by real and genuine *grief*. In another situation, Mark says this about Jesus:

- ✓ Mark 3:5 — And he looked around at them with *anger, grieved* at their hardness of heart.

When I have that feeling of anger, I should ask myself, “What is the *true reason* for my anger?” Is it because of a personal offense, or is it because I love the glory of my Creator and Savior? Is my anger always accompanied by genuine grief, and do I experience this same feeling of anger and grief over the sin in my own life? And then another question I should ask myself is this: “What is the *true goal or end* of my anger?” In many ways this question is the same as the last. If the reason for my anger is zeal for God’s glory, then the goal of my anger will be the vindication, and honor, and display of God’s glory! That’s the goal! That’s what’s truly desired more than anything else. But there’s another way that we should be able to answer this question about the goal of our anger. Is the desired goal and end of our anger the *good* of our brother, or even the good of the world around us? We can think of the example of Moses when he came down from Mount Sinai and found the people of Israel worshipping a golden calf:

- ✓ Exodus 32:19 — As soon as he came near the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, Moses’ anger burned hot, and he threw the tablets out of his hands and broke them at the foot of the mountain.

Moses was angry with a white hot anger. He was angry *with the PEOPLE*, not because he hated the people, but because he hated their sin and the path of self-destruction that they were choosing. “Without ardent *hatred* towards *what* is wicked, there can be no lawful *anger* towards *those* who are wicked.” (Braune) So Jude writes:

- ✓ Jude 23 — *Save* others by snatching them out of the fire; to others *show mercy* with fear, *hating* even the garment stained by the flesh.

Moses’ hatred of the sin caused him to feel anger towards the people not only for breaking *God’s* law, but also for choosing this path of *self*-destruction. And so his anger towards the people was not without genuine love. This explains why Moses could pray that very same day for the same people with whom he was so burning angry:

- ✓ Exodus 32:32 — But now, if you will *forgive their sin*—but if not, please blot me out of your book that you have written.

Moses could express genuine love for the same people with whom he was so angry.

“*Anger* [is], in God, is the [working] of *holy love* against sin and corruption disturbing and perverting moral order... [anger] is... a witness and basis of active *love* in the surroundings of an unholy world. The *right* to be angry is admitted and granted, but to be angry *rightly* however. *Loveless anger is as incorrect as angerless love.*” (Braune)

So righteous anger is never caused by a personal grievance, but rather by an offense against God – the Creator, and Ruler, and Savior of the world. Righteous anger is always accompanied by genuine grief. For anger to be genuine, we must know the *same feelings* of anger and grief over the sin in our own lives. And finally, righteous anger is always accompanied by genuine love.

There are times when it is a necessary duty for a Christian to be angry. But this leads me to ask: how often have we known this kind of anger – a truly righteous kind of anger? And what does

the absence or scarcity of this anger say about our own holiness? I like how Hodge speaks of the “feeling” of anger “mingled with holy affections... in a holy mind.” May God transform us and change us into a people who know what it is to be righteously angry. May we truly have the “*holy affections*” that result in righteous anger.

## II. **“Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your provocation”**

The principle here is simple. Our righteous anger degenerates into sinful anger very quickly. Therefore, even when we are righteously angry, we must not let the sun go down on our provocation. This is how it is that we are able to be angry *and not sin*. The Greek word here translated “provocation” is not the usual word for “anger” (the one used earlier in the verse), and neither is it the usual word for “wrath” (used later in verse 31) It occurs only here in the Bible, and outside of the Bible it usually refers to that which provokes to anger. Here the point is not so much on that which provokes to anger, but on the *feeling* of being provoked. So Hendriksen translates: “Let not the sun go down on that *angry mood* of yours” (Braune: “irritation”). “Do not let the sun go down on your provocation” – that provoked, angry feeling inside.

Paul is warning us that as human beings we are not built to sustain anger (even righteous anger) for long periods of time. He’s warning us that what starts out as righteous anger, if it is cherished and clung to, will invariably (*every time*) degenerate into *sinful* anger – spite, and vengefulness, and malice – the things that Paul will talk about in verse 31. But I had to ask myself *why* this is. Shouldn’t it be possible for a man who is truly holy to sustain continuous righteous anger over long periods of time? Paul apparently answers “no” – “Do *not* let the *sun go down* on your provocation.” Even that feeling of righteous anger must not be allowed to go to bed with us. And I wonder if the reason is this: The continuation of truly righteous anger is *meant* to result in righteous judgment and vengeance. But righteous judgment and vengeance is never *ours* to take. Paul says in Romans chapter 12:

- ✓ Romans 12:19 — Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.”

Because vengeance and judgment is the sole prerogative of God, it is only God who can be angry “forever.”

- ✓ Jeremiah 17:4 — You shall loosen your hand from your heritage that I gave to you, and I will make you serve your enemies in a land that you do not know, for in my anger a fire is kindled that shall burn forever.”

The perpetual burning of God’s anger is coupled with the venting of God’s vengeance and retribution. So the Psalmist also says:

- ✓ Psalm 7:11 — God is a righteous *judge*, and a God who *feels indignation every day*.

Since we have not been appointed by God as His judges, then we must not let the sun set on our provocation because otherwise it will always lead us into sinful anger and the taking of our *own* vengeance. We can think here of the example of Nehemiah. He writes:

- ✓ Nehemiah 13:23–27, 31 — In those days also I saw the Jews who had married women of Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab... And I confronted them and cursed them and beat some of them and pulled out their hair. And I made them take an oath in the name of God, saying, “You shall not give your daughters to their sons, or take their daughters for your sons or for yourselves. Did not Solomon king of Israel sin on account of such women? Among the many nations there was no king like him, and he was beloved by his God, and God made him king over all Israel. Nevertheless, foreign women made even him to sin. Shall we then listen to you and do all this great evil and act treacherously against our God by marrying foreign women?” ... Remember me, O my God, for good.

Once again, how often have we know what it is to have a righteous anger like this? How often have we brought glory to God in our anger? Nehemiah’s anger was righteous anger because his reason was truly the violation of *God’s* law, and his goal was truly the good of the people. It’s not difficult at all to imagine Nehemiah’s anger mixed with genuine grief and genuine love. We also have to remember that Nehemiah was the appointed governor and authority over the people, so what wouldn’t be legitimate for many others *was* legitimate for him. *But*, if Nehemiah were to cultivate and continue in that righteous anger, it would most certainly have turned into sinful anger – spite, vengeance, and hatred.

Hodge says: “Anger, even when justified, is not to be cherished.” (cf. O’Brien) The truth of the matter is simply this: We *cannot* maintain those righteous feelings of righteous anger for longer than a single day, and have them remain righteous feelings of righteous anger. *Therefore*, “do not [*ever*] let the sun go down upon those feelings of anger.” Riddle says: “Anger may be right; is far more likely to be wrong; [and] certainly is, if it lasts long.” So “When the curfew bell rings, let us then also quench all sparks of [righteous] anger and heat of [righteous] passion.” (Fuller; quoted in Braune)

But once again, the point here is *righteous* anger, and it’s very clear what righteous anger is, and what righteous anger is not. Before we’ll ever have a need to apply this second part of the verse, most of us will need God to work in us more of those “holy affections” without which righteous anger will never be possible for us in the first place. Once we have learned the holy affections that lead to righteous anger, only then will we have need of the main point of this exhortation: We must not nourish and maintain even our righteous feelings of anger because otherwise we’ve already sinned by presuming to take to ourselves the part of God. *Therefore*, “do not [*ever*] let the sun go down upon your feelings of anger.”

### **III. “Nor give place to the devil.”**

Here in verse 27 Paul makes explicit what we’ve already assumed from verse 26. Hodge says: “Anger, when *cherished*, gives the tempter great power over us, as it furnishes a  *motive*  to yield to his evil suggestions.”

“As Satan is dethroned and shut to the doors of the hearts of all such as are true believers; so, though he shall never reign again over them at his pleasure... yet he is daily watching,

and searching out, if it were but the narrowest passage and least opportunity whereby he may again re-enter his old possession, and exercise his former tyranny.” (Fergusson)

When we cherish our righteous feelings of anger past sundown, we give place—opportunity—to the devil to work out all of his deadly schemes. The cherishing of even *righteous* anger is literally the playground of Satan – the enemy of our souls.

We’re in the midst of a series of six sections describing the “putting off” of the old man and the “putting on” of the new man – the one created according to God in righteousness and holiness of the truth. That’s Gospel. That’s the Gospel context for these concrete examples. But then at the end of each of these six individual examples, Paul gives what I like to call another “Gospel *reason*” or “Gospel motivation.” Last week, Paul said:

**Put OFF:**                   Therefore, having put off the lie,  
**Put ON:**                         speak truth—each of you—with his neighbor,  
**Gospel reason:**                         *because we are members of one another.*

There’s the Gospel. This week, he says:

**Put OFF:**                    *Be angry and do not sin; do not* let the sun go down on your provocation,  
**Gospel reason:**                         *nor give place* to the devil.

How is that a Gospel reason for “putting off” sinful anger? By putting off sinful anger, we’re living out the Gospel reality that Paul has been emphasizing and will continue to emphasize throughout the entire book of Ephesians. We who were in bondage to the ruler of the authority of the air (2:2) have now been seated with Christ in the heavenly places (2:6) far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and every name that is named (1:21). When we refuse to let the sun go down on our anger, we’re living out the *Gospel* reality that we are no longer under the dominion of Satan, and so we are no longer obligated by our nature to give Him any “place” or room in our lives. It’s interesting that the literal translation of Romans 12:19 looks like this:

✓ Romans 12:19 — Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but *give place* to the wrath [of God], for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.”

So as those who have been seated with Christ in the heavenly places, by *not* “*giving place*” to the devil, we *are* “*giving place*” to God, and specifically to *His* righteous wrath *if* not in this life, then on the coming Day of Judgment when we ourselves will be saved from that wrath only because of the shed blood of Jesus Christ our Savior (Eph. 2:3-5).

*Be angry and do not sin;  
do not let the sun go down on your provocation,  
nor give place to the devil.*