

Proverbs Study Notes

Lessons Five and Six: Anger

Introduction

One topic the Proverbs look at in some detail is anger. The topic of anger is not so common as communication, but is more common than many other themes.

For some of your students, anger is not a major issue, but for others, anger has become a way of life. This is particularly true in western cultures. In other parts of the world, anger is considered a great sin, and the appearance of anger is astutely avoided (this is one reason that westerners are so taken with the people when they visit third world countries). So the average westerner is quicker to express his anger than most of the rest of the world. And anger may have some value: for one thing, the reason we are quicker to express it is that our culture is 'truth-based.' In other words, we consider conveying the truth as more important than making people happy, which isn't always such a bad thing. But in general, man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God requires (Jas. 1:20); we tend to go far beyond what is righteous. So most of the time our anger is not nearly as justified as it seems, and for some people, it is a basic addiction.

Why are some of us so addicted to anger? We will look at some of the reasons Proverbs gives to anger, but we should probably also admit what is not overtly stated: **we use anger because it works**. Anger often gets us what we want. This may not be directed at a person. I learned on the construction site that I could move things that I could not otherwise move if I got angry at them (ever got really mad at bolt that was stuck on your car?). On the other hand, sometimes anger is directed at people. Whether it's the physically abusive father, or the mother who controls the family with her fits, living with an angry person can be no joke.

But one of the basic messages of Proverbs is that anger doesn't work. In the end, there are consequences to anger that the wise man recognizes and the angry man doesn't, that make it counter-productive. Recognizing those consequences can help us to live wiser and more godly lives.

As you teach this lesson, you should remember that there is likely someone in your class who greatly struggles with this. And that person will rarely have their problem addressed directly in church. So this is a golden opportunity. If I were teaching, I would encourage students to ask people in their life honestly if they use anger to control them. Of course such a question does no good if they are going to be angry at the response! So they have to guarantee their people immunity if they tell the truth! We will take a look at (1) the causes of anger, (2) at how to avoid anger, and (3) at consequences of anger. There is clearly too much material in this to cover in one lesson, so feel free to pick and choose the most relevant verses.

I. Causes of Anger

The proverbs have more to say about the consequences of anger than they do about causes. Nevertheless, there are some passages that relate to what brings anger about or to what elevates anger that is already there.

A. Provocation. In their realism, the Proverbs do not ignore the fact that provocation is difficult. They do not ask us to pretend that the provoking fool, the frustrating child, the

nagging wife, and the harshly spoken word are not difficult to deal with. And so we mention them here.

However, I'm not sure that the proverbs would say these are true causes of anger *per se*. Anger is one of many ways to respond to a situation, so the idea that a situation or person *makes* me angry isn't necessarily true. This can be seen by the fact that others who face the same situation do not become angry. They may become very sad, or driven to resolve the situation, or may not even see it as a problem at all. This is in large part what James means when he says "we are tempted when we are drawn away by our own lust and enticed" (1:13-18). The source of anger is really our character. Nevertheless, Proverbs shows that some circumstances are...at the least...provoking.

***Stone is heavy and sand a burden,
but provocation by a fool is heavier than both (27:3).***

This is an antithetical (contrasting) parallel. The point of comparison is weariness. While a stone is heavy to carry around, and sand is a burden, to carry around the irritating antics of a fool at home or at work, is an even greater burden.

As with the general thrust of the Proverbs, I suspect the point here is not so much that we can blame our loss of temper on provocation. Rather, the message is that we should count the cost of such provocation before we yoke ourselves to someone who is foolish. Proverbs is all about teaching young people the kind of people they should and should not make company with. The principle here would probably be *the frustration a fool's company brings will become as exhausting as carrying sand or rocks*.

That is looking at things from the perspective of those who keep company with fools. Solomon also notes however, the relationship of anger and foolishness from the fool's perspective: *a fool's lips walk into a fight, and his mouth invites a beating (18:6)*. Thus while it is provoking to be with a fool, it is absolutely begging for a beating to be a fool!

***A foolish son is destruction to his father,
And the contentions of a wife are a constant dripping (19:13).***

This is another passage that shows the difficulty of provocation. The foolish son is destruction of the father because he ruins all the father has worked for: He loses the family's good name, he loses the family business, and he doesn't support his father in his old age. Thus in the end, rather than adding to his father as he should, he only takes away; he is a destroyer. The contentious wife (cf. also Prov. 27:15) is here likened to a constant dripping. She is as maddening as a problem which you can do nothing about, but which continually irritates; a sort of marital Chinese water torture!

These two observations are put together in a synthetic parallelism, so the second line adds to the first. Taken together, the message is probably that *family relationships are very powerful, and so should be attended to closely*. Nevertheless, the passage does show the ability of the foolish son or wife to provoke.

*A soft answer turns away wrath
But harsh words stir up anger (15:1.)*

Here Solomon shows both sides of the issue. An answer that is soft, in the sense that it is not hurtful—in other words, truth that is expressed in a kind way— has the power to turn away wrath that is already there. Harsh words, on the other hand, ‘stir up’ anger. The verb translated ‘stirs up’ relates to elevating something; it could be translated ‘causes (anger) to rise’. So the idea is not so much that the anger was caused by the painful words, but that the anger that was there in the first place is exacerbated. The basic message then, is that *a situation that is frustrating can be made more or less so by the words that are spoken in relation to it.*

B. Learning. Another cause of anger is learning to be angry. The following verse shows that one way anger is learned is by associating with those whose first response to a situation in anger.

*Do not associate with a man given to anger;
Or go with a hot-tempered man,
Or you will learn his ways
And find a snare for yourself (22:24-25)*

Here Solomon forbids his son from associating with a man given to anger. Literally, to a man ‘with flared nostrils’ (Waltke 2005:232). The idea is that this is someone who has anger as a way of life. The reason this is forbidden is that the son will learn the ways of this man. Waltke points out that this relates to becoming comfortable with his ways so that we ultimately replicate them.

The final result of this is not only the harm of those against whom you are angry, but harm for yourself. A snare is not just any kind of trap; it is a loose loop made of string, rope, or (these days) wire. It is laid in a narrow spot in the animal’s trail so that either its head or foot goes into it. Soon as the animal steps into it, it begins to tighten, and is laid in such a way that it can get tighter but will not get looser. Snares are one of the cruelest ways of killing animals. On hunts in Africa I have seen man an animal that was severely wounded or killed and left in the snares of poachers. But enough about Africa! The snare is a perfect word picture for anger because it is easy to get into but difficult to get out of and usually results in the death of the snared animal.

This is how an angry response is: it is so easy to start, but ultimately difficult to walk away from and destructive to the one who has learned it. The principle of this passage is that *we should avoid association with hotheads because if we do not, we will repeat their sin, and ultimately do ourselves grievous, irreversible harm.*

C. Character. A third cause of anger is our character. This is not in competition with point B above, for we are not told here how a person comes to be quarrelsome, raging,

etc. In all likelihood they learned it as in B, and so are easily provoked by situations like those presented in A and others.

***Better to live in a desert
than with a quarrelsome and ill-tempered wife (21:19).***

The quarrelsome wife is not as common as the sluggard in Proverbs, but she is common enough to merit several mentions (cf. 21:9, 19:13, 25:24, 27:15). I mention her here only because she is described as “quarrelsome and ill-tempered.” In other words, anger has become part of her character. She has learned to respond to, and motivate her family with her constant war-making. The point here is that a husband who chooses such a wife will ultimately find a desert (here) or the corner of a roof (in 21:9)—uninhabitable places that have nothing in the way of creature comforts—a ‘well-watered oasis’ (Kitchen 2006:476).

***Mockers stir up a city,
but wise men turn away anger
When a wise man has a controversy with a foolish man,
The foolish man either rages or laughs, and there is no rest. (29:8-9).***

Once again we see in this passage that mockers and fools respond to situations by being angry and stirring up anger in others. The point is that anger has become a part of their character. We might add to these passages 22:24 above, and 15:18 below.

II. Avoiding Anger. The proverbs has some things to say about how to avoid anger. Most of this relates not only to not becoming angry yourself, but also to calming down the entire situation rather than escalating the frustration.

A. Speaking gentle words turns away the anger of others. We have already looked at this proverb briefly. A ‘soft’ response is one with no sharp edges; in other words, it is truth expressed in such a way that the expression of that truth isn’t any more hurtful than the truth itself is. On the other hand, a harsh word is one that causes pain by its expression. Solomon states the obvious truth that such a response will only escalate an angry situation.

***A gentle answer turns away wrath,
but a harsh word stirs up anger (15:1).***

B. Being slow to anger yourself calms disputes. In addition to the kind of words you speak, our character can help us avoid anger. Just as being hot-tempered, quarrelsome, or vexing can become a part of our character, so can being slow to anger. If we have learned to respond to frustrating situations in a calm way, we will go a long way toward calming disputes.

***A hot-tempered man stirs up strife,
But the slow to anger calms a dispute (15:18)***

C. Realize that overlooking an offense is a sign of strength, not weakness.

Men, especially, tend to believe that true strength is the ability to respond to an offense aggressively. To overlook it seems to be a sign of weakness rather than power. Thus one of the things I think encourages men to be angry is that to respond to an offense by overlooking it is something we are often told is shameful. It seems to be cowardly. Proverbs does not condone cowardice. But it shows that cowardice is not always the motivating factor in overlooking an offense, nor is such a response a sign of weakness.

*A man's wisdom gives him patience;
it is to his glory to overlook an offense (19:11).*

In contrast to the normal ascription of overlooking an offense with cowardice, Solomon informs us that it comes from wisdom. This is a synthetic parallelism. First, one must understand that it is wisdom that gives someone patience. This is taught throughout the Proverbs. But one example of that is the fact that overlooking an offense is likened to a splendid garment. One might paraphrase this proverb *a wise man really shines, really shows off his wisdom, when he overlooks an offense.*

*He who is slow to anger is better than the mighty,
And he who rules his spirit, than he who captures a city (16:32).*

Once again Solomon shows that being slow to anger is a sign of strength. In this synonymous parallel, the first line makes the point that a person who is slow to anger is better than a mighty person. The word for 'mighty' is *gibbor*, which may be translated 'warrior'. It refers to one who does mighty or powerful deeds, usually in battle. The second line repeats the idea of the first, and adjusts it slightly: a person who can rule his own spirit is better than someone who can capture a city and so rule it by force.

Here the question is 'better in what sense?' Is he better in terms of his benefit to society (i.e. it's better for your society to have someone slow to anger than someone mighty) or is he better at conquering (a man who is slow to anger is mightier than a warrior)? Waltke definitely takes the former solution, but I'm not so sure that's correct. It may be that a man who is patient will, in the end, have more power than the man who is mighty, because his power can be sustained. Perhaps the two roll into one idea that the man who can rule himself conquers his most dangerous enemy. At any rate, this proverb shows that patience is not born of weakness; it is born of strength.

D. Realize that the easiest time to stop anger is before it starts

*The beginning of strife is like letting out water,
So abandon the quarrel before it breaks out (17:14)*

A final means of avoiding anger is to realize the best time to control it. This could easily be included in the point below (consequences of anger) as it shows one result of

expressing anger. However, because the timing aspect is probably the most important idea of this proverb, I've placed it here.

This proverb compares the expression of anger between people (strife) with a hole in a dam. The leak in a dam may initially look small and insignificant. But a person with wisdom sees the hole not for the tiny leak it is, but for the rushing unstoppable torrent it will soon become. Because he recognizes the incredible potential for damage, he doesn't dig little holes in dams. Likewise the wise man and an angry exchange. Though he may be wronged, he sees the outburst that would feel so good not for the short initial exchange, but for the increased conflict it will bring. Like other wise people, he sees not just the immediate, but the far-reaching effects of his behavior.

The conclusion is simple: stop a quarrel before it breaks out. If there is a means to fix the problem; fix it. If it can't be fixed and your opponent wants to goad you into an argument, don't comply. This does not teach us to avoid all conflict and become a doormat. The faithful friend still wounds those he cares about when it's in their best interest. If Solomon envisioned people never speaking about differences of opinion, there wouldn't be so many Proverbs about how to listen to rebuke. Rather the point of this Proverb probably relates more to contention; to strife or arguing than to a discussion of differences of opinion. The difference is once again in the way the issue is approached. The best way to avoid a big argument is to avoid a small one.

E. Stay away from strife that does not involve you. One other way to avoid anger is not to meddle in issues that do not directly involve you. This is clearly stated in the Proverb below:

Like one who takes a dog by the ears

Is he who passes by and meddles with strife not belonging to him (26:17).

Dogs in the Ancient Near East were not considered noble companions. They were considered unclean scavengers, as they still are in much of the world. As such, many of the dogs you would see there are semi-wild animals. To grab a passing dog by the ears is not the same thing as stroking the family companion! It is to invite a quick bite or more sustained mauling! It is obvious foolishness.

Solomon compares this with the behavior of one who meddles in a conflict in which he has no interest. While it is true that there are times when it is noble and right to rescue those who are being mistreated (Prov. 31:8-9), in general we need to stay away from quarrels that don't involve us. Think of how much stress we take on worrying about things we can't do anything about: Wars on the other side of the world, our child's classmates, politics, conflicts that acquaintances are involved in, and even the spectacular world of Hollywood gossip. Much of this is really none of our business. We would be healthier as individuals and as a society if we just stayed out of such things.

I can remember Bill Gothard pointing out the dangers of taking up offense for others at his seminar. At the time I wondered why that was seen as such a bad thing, but now I

can see he was right. This is a dangerous practice for several reasons: (1) We often don't know all the facts involved, and so look at things one sided. (2) We also frequently only care about one person in the argument, and so we are biased. (3) Perhaps most damaging, even though we are biased in the conflict, we often feel that we are the most un-biased party involved, and so we become even more aggressive. Our perception that we are not fighting for ourselves makes us even more likely to over-react.

This proverb is not saying all of the above: it is simply warning us not to get involved. But there is no doubt that this is a key way to avoid anger as a lifestyle. A great deal of the angry man's anger comes from strife that is not his.

III. Consequences of Anger. As with most of the other traps that Proverbs warns us about, one of the best ways to avoid anger is to recognize the long-term consequences. As pointed out in the introduction, the reason many people are angry people is because it seems to get them what they want. But several proverbs show us that in the long run this may not be true.

A. Strife. As the verses below show, a person who is angry stirs up strife between people. In other words, one unanticipated consequence of anger is that it promotes itself. If you struggle with anger, you should realize that strife—anger producing situations—will follow you around. This happens because (1) **those around you learn your ways.** Eventually you will be surrounded by people who also use anger to settle issues. (2) **Because you stir things up.** As the proverbs below show, your very presence elevates the anger level in the environment. For one thing, people are already on the defensive when they talk to you. They probably won't discuss things with you until they're ready to go to war.

The irony of this is that, like the sluggard whose way to work is blocked by thorns, you really will have a harder time remaining calm than others until you learn to master your anger.

*An angry man stirs up dissension,
and a hot-tempered one commits many sins (29:22).*

*For as churning the milk produces butter,
and as twisting the nose produces blood,
so stirring up anger produces strife.” (30:33).*

B. Natural Consequences. In addition to this, there are natural consequences to our anger. As the Proverb below clearly shows, there is a price to be paid. It might be good to discuss with your students what kind of penalties we might have to pay for anger. Broken relationships and broken stuff are the most obvious, but there are other costs as well. In addition to this, as this proverb shows, wise people will NOT rescue you from the consequences of your anger. People who don't have to pay the price for their anger usually never have a clue what that price is. They go around dropping little hydrogen bombs in everyone's lives and walking away. But eventually we all pay in one way or another.

*A man of great anger will bear the penalty,
For if you rescue him, you will only have to do it again (19:19).*

C. Avoidance by the wise. Another consequence of anger is that wise people will avoid you. They will not come and confront you (because they will realize that you don't receive rebuke well); they will simply avoid you. Ironically that only leaves you with people who are not clever enough to stay away and so learn to be like you. These are not the kind of people that will encourage you to change. So the wages of anger becomes more anger.

*Do not associate with a man given to anger;
Or go with a hot-tempered man,
Or you will learn his ways
And find a snare for yourself (22:24-25)*

D. Foolishness. Ultimately anger is a form of foolishness because it fails to regard the consequences of disobeying God. It might be a good discussion to ask for testimonials of things people have done in their anger. Someone who is really angry is only living for the moment, and so tends to make foolish decisions.

*A quick-tempered man does foolish things,
and a crafty man is hated (14:17).*

*Keeping away from strife is an honor for a man,
But any fool will quarrel (20:3).*

E. Damaged Relationships. One obvious consequence of anger is damaged relationships. Often the closer the relationship, the harder it is to reconcile (Kitchen 2006:403). Scripture is full of examples, from Jacob and Esau, to Joseph and his brothers of brothers who became bitter enemies. Thus a brother offended is harder to be won than a strong city. Perhaps this is one reason that it is better to rule your spirit than to capture a city (Prov. 16:32); if you rule your spirit, you won't have to!

The 'bars of a citadel' refer to the bolt that locks the gate. This part of a fortress had to be the strongest, as it was always the first point of attack (Waltke 2005:84-85). But I wonder if the point also isn't that it is the contentions that are the key to the walls between us. In other words, not only are they strong dividers, but if we can remove them, the wall between us is opened.

*A brother offended is harder to be won than a strong city,
And contentions are like the bars of a citadel (18:19).*

F. Self Destruction. Another consequence of anger is self-destruction. The two verses below are meant to be taken together (so Waltke) so the reference to passion is not about sexual passion, but about the arousal of anger. The point is that anger not only is

foolishness, but that one reason it is foolishness is because it destroys us from within. The emotion of anger has physiological effects on us.

***He who is slow to anger has great understanding,
But he who is quick-tempered exalts folly.
A tranquil heart is life to the body,
But passion is rotteness to the bones (14:29-30)***

But the self-destruction of anger is not merely psycho-somatic. It also relates to other damage that anger exposes us to. The following proverb is very instructive in this regard:

***Like a city whose walls are broken down
is a man who lacks self-control (25:28).***

This proverb shows that self control, which may at times seem like a wall between us and what we really want, is actually a wall between us that that which would damage us. The lack of self control—and this applies greatly to a lack of controlling our anger—exposes us to all kinds of dangers. As Waltke (2005:344) has pointed out, this makes us vulnerable in several ways (1) unless we master our passions, sin will master us (cf. Gen. 4:6-7), (2) society will pay back the man who cannot control his anger; we will face judicial and relational consequences, (3) we are powerless to resist temptation from without. This differs from the first in that this deals with specific instances of temptation, and the first reason relates to our overall character. Anger is self-destructive in that it exposes us to dangers that self control will protect us against.

***He who loves a quarrel loves sin;
he who builds a high gate invites destruction (17:19).***

This proverb is a bit enigmatic. The connection between the two lines is not at first completely clear. The first line is obvious enough: someone who loves to quarrel loves to sin. But what is the meaning of the second line? Is this talking about someone who is arrogant, and so exalts his house like he does himself? Or is it someone who is defensive? In light of the first line, it is probably more the latter, but in a sense the combination of both. In other words, the one who provokes his neighbor by obviously shutting him out invites destruction. Ironically, the building of the wall makes it more likely that people will try to invade him, and the alienation he has caused will make it less likely that others will help him.

When it comes to relationships, this is certainly true. The one who is confrontational and aloof will cause the most adversarial people around him to seek his destruction, and the others will quietly rejoice when it comes. Thus the aggression and arrogance that he thought would protect him proves to be his undoing.

G. God's Judgment. One final consequence of anger is that it invites the judgment of God. The following verses in Proverbs may not seem to go together at first glance:

*Do not contend with a man without cause,
If he has done you no harm.
31 Do not envy a man of violence
And do not choose any of his ways.
32 For the devious are an abomination to the LORD;
But He is intimate with the upright (3:30-32).*

A closer look however, shows that they are connected. This can be seen by the connective ‘for’ which is explanatory. “For” here gives the reason that Solomon has just instructed his son not to have strife and violence with others. The reason, is that those who are devious—and he would include in that people who are contentious—are an abomination to the Lord.

In many ways, this is a summary of the message of Proverbs about anger and really about most of the topics it addresses. The point made is that God watches over the universe. In the infinite wisdom with which he created this world (Prov. 8), God has woven into the fabric of the universe a basic moral principle that what goes around comes around. In other words, not only do we face ultimate divine judgment for sin in the next world, God has seen to it that we face temporal judgment for sin in this world. The man who causes others to suffer by his anger will ultimately suffer more. The one who shuns work finds it ironically almost impossible to work once he realizes the need. The one who gives to those in need has his own needs provided for. The one who is greedy, and delights in quick riches ultimately finds himself lacking. The fool is the one who fails to recognize this wisdom, and so suffers the ironic consequences time after time. The wise man is the one who listens to God, recognizes the consequences, and so is made even happier in his righteousness.