

A Stop by Quiet Waters

“The Deadly Consequences of Smoldering Anger”

*“Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry,
and do not give the devil a foothold.” Eph 4:26-27 ^{NIV}*

One summer as a teenager I worked on a Michigan “muck farm.” Muck is former marshland consisting of 80% organic material rich in nutrients for growing certain vegetables. But when the conditions are right it’s possible for a fire to start in the muck and work its way underground where it can smolder for weeks or months. We had such a fire in one of the fields and though we poured barrels and barrels of water on the soil over the subterranean fire we could not put it out.

Unresolved anger is like a muck fire. On the surface everything looks fine, except for small wisps of “smoke” which occasionally rise from somewhere within. During the early years of my pastoral ministry I harbored a low level of inner anger. The primary evidence of its presence came when I was preaching. I would begin a message mildly enough, but as I proceeded I became more and more intense and emphatic in what I was saying, and by the end of the message I was speaking in anger. I didn’t understand what was happening and persuaded myself that it was just righteous indignation at the sin and wickedness I was unmasking.

Eventually I faced the fact that something was wrong inside, I was angry and it had little to do with what I was preaching. I wasn’t angry during college and seminary, so I hadn’t brought it into the ministry with me. I was happily married so it wasn’t coming from marital problems. Where and why had this smoldering fire begun?

Bit by bit I discovered the reasons for my anger. I had entered the ministry with a great vision of what it would be like and how I would succeed as a pastor. I loved the Lord, I knew the gospel, and I thought I knew what the church needed and wanted from me. But I soon discovered that what I thought they needed was not what they thought they needed, and what I thought they wanted wasn’t what they wanted from me. I began to feel disappointed with them because they weren’t living up to what I expected of them. I began to put pressure on them to change and grow. Instead of responding as I naively hoped they would, I ran into passive resistance, then criticism, then outright opposition.

Things said and done hurt me deeply but I didn’t deal with them as the Scriptures tell us to. Rather than facing issues and individuals directly, I held onto them until they became a smoldering fire of anger which couldn’t be pinned down to any one person or incident. I had given the devil a foothold in my life and he used it to divide and conquer us, bringing bitterness into my life and havoc into the church.

As I look back on that situation there were several things I failed to understand and do. Had I known and done these things my pastorate there could have turned out differently

than it did. **First**, I didn't understand the true nature of pastoral ministry. I didn't realize that disappointments, hurts, criticisms, opposition, etc., from within the church were an inevitable part of a pastor's life. Sheep can bite! I didn't see their spiritual immaturity as part of what I was called to help them overcome, I considered it an obstacle to my vision for a successful church.

Paul shows us what true pastoring involves in his first letter to the Corinthians. In chapter one he lauds them for all they are and have in Christ and the Holy Spirit, then he systematically begins to deal with the many issues in that church one by one. Rather than berate and harangue them about these things he gave them insight and guidance in how to deal with the problems and issues. Paul didn't see them as an obstacle to his goals, he saw that his responsibility was to help them grow up in Christ in the same way a father helps his children grow up. The Corinthian church is an example of what all churches are like, and Paul's pastoral ministry to them is an example of what our ministries should be like to our congregations.

Second, I wasn't prepared to experience disappointments and opposition to my ministry. These things caught me off guard. Churches are not pure societies of redeemed, spiritually mature believers. At best they are a mix of the redeemed and unredeemed, spiritual and carnal, humble and haughty, mature and immature people. Jesus taught us this in the parable of the wheat and the weed seeds in the same field. We pastor in the context of such mixes.

Third, I didn't pray for those who opposed me as Jesus taught us to. I didn't pray for true blessing to come on them from God. I prayed for God to change them. One of the best ways to keep our anger from giving the devil a foothold in us, creating bitterness and resentment, is to pray for the Lord to truly and mightily bless those who have hurt us or oppose us. He has given us this command more for our sakes than for those who are standing in our way. If we allow anger to smolder within it does more damage to us than to anyone else. The heat and smoke of our resentment will pollute everything we seek to be and do for our Lord Jesus.

Finally, I didn't truly forgive individuals for things said or done. I didn't treat issues as issues, I treated them as personalities, and I didn't seek to be reconciled with those who had something against me, I considered them my opponents. I hung onto hurts and criticisms, etc., allowing them to become anger, and the anger to become bitterness. I wasn't secure and mature enough in Christ to deal with my anger and put it behind me quickly. It smoldered and erupted, smoldered and erupted, until the damage was beyond repair and I resigned.

James says that, "*anger does not bring about the righteous life God desires.*" I learned the hard way the deadly consequences of smoldering anger. It's natural and acceptable to become angry, even our Lord Jesus did on occasion. It's what we do with what causes our anger that determines whether we'll control it or be controlled by it, whether we please or grieve our Heavenly Father, whether we succeed or fail as pastors. The challenges, demands, pressures, expectations, and opposition facing us as pastors have

never been greater in the history of the American church. But if we have been called by God to this great work of making disciples and building his kingdom then it's crucial that we apply biblical principles to the causes of our anger. Let's resolve to never allow the devil a foothold in us, to never give him the satisfaction of thinking that he has struck our heavenly Father through us. Let's consistently forgive those who sin against us – as often as it happens, pray for those who mistreat us, and bless those who curse us. In this way we reveal to whom we belong and whom we are listening to and following.

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