

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,
on Sunday, September 25, 1994, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

PROVERBS 16:32

"It is better to be slow-tempered than famous; it is better to have self-control than to control an army."
(Living Bible)

PEARLS FROM THE PROVERBS

(4) Taming My Temper

The average man loses his temper six times a week! The average woman loses her temper only three times a week. Women get angry more often at people, while men get angry more often at things -- especially when, like machines, they break down. Single adults express anger twice as often as married adults. Men are more physical with their anger than women; and you are more likely to express anger at home than anywhere else.

In the light of these statistics, let us look at our text for this morning: "It is better to be slow-tempered than famous; it is better to have self-control than to control an army."

One day Alexander the Great, in a fit of rage, struck his favorite general so hard that he killed him, although he had been his best friend. And he cried out, "I have conquered the world, but I can't even conquer my own temper."

How do you get a grip on your temper? Proverbs says it can be done by doing three things:

1. You REMEMBER: You remember the results; because every time you blow up, there are negative consequences. When you remember all the negative effects produced by anger, that should cause you to calm down.
2. You REFLECT: You reflect before reacting. Before you impulsively respond, you cool down and postpone your anger. And,
3. You RESTRAIN: You restrain your remarks. You don't say all that is on your mind when you're angry.

Do those sound like three good pieces of advice?

1. **You REMEMBER THE RESULTS.** Let's look at some verses from Proverbs. Here is Proverbs 29:22 (LB), "A hot-tempered man starts fights and gets into (what?) all kinds of trouble." Do you agree with that verse? It says in Proverbs 15:18 (GN), "Hot tempers cause arguments." How many of you ever get into an argument because of a hot temper? Proverbs 14:29 (GN) says, "...if you have a hot temper you only show how stupid you are"! Then Proverbs 14:17 (GN) reminds us that "people with a hot temper do foolish things." Have you ever done any foolish things in a fit of temper?!

Someone has said that those who fly into a rage seldom make a smooth landing! When you lose your temper, you always lose. You lose more than your temper. You can

lose people's respect for you. You can lose your health; your job; you can lose your wife or your husband. You can lose your children.

Look at Proverbs 11:29, "The fool who provokes his family to anger and resentment will finally have nothing worthwhile left." Anger starts first in the family, and it says it causes a devastating effect.

Some of you may have seen an article in James Dobson's Focus on the Family entitled, "When You Feel Like Screaming." They took a survey of 9 to 12-year olds and asked them two questions:

- a. What do you like most about your mother? and
- b. What do you dislike most about your mother?

The answers to the first question were varied; but with regard to the second question, the answers were almost unanimous. They said, "I dislike her screaming! I can't stand it when she screams." An acquaintance of mine, a man in his 50s, says that his most vivid memory of his mother is her screaming at him constantly when he was a little boy.

Now, why do we lose our temper and scream? Because it works! There is a very powerful short-term effect. Psychologists know this. When you get angry and yell at somebody, most of the time people will comply just out of fear. "OK, OK, I'll come to the dinner table!" But in the long run you lose. Write this down -- "Anger alienates." In the long run you can lose a relationship.

So, Proverbs says that if you're going to get a grip on your temper, first remember the results -- it always causes negative effects.

2. REFLECT BEFORE REACTING. Don't respond impulsively. Think it through first. Read Proverbs 29:11 (NEB), "A stupid man gives free rein to his anger; a wise man waits and lets it grow cool." Would you circle the word "cool?" I want you to understand that the phrase "cool it" is a biblical term! Just "chill out"!

"A stupid man gives free rein to his anger..." Someone should have told that to John McEnroe years ago; and to the slam-dunk wrestling fraternity, and to some of the acid-tongued columnists in the Washington Post! Circle the word "waits." A wise man waits and lets his anger grow cool. One of the great remedies for anger is delay. The longer you hold your temper in check, the more it improves. Have you noticed that? If you vent it immediately, it's bad news; but the longer you hold it, the better it gets.

Thomas Jefferson once said, "When you're angry, count to ten. When you're very angry, count to a hundred." I would add that if you're still ready to blow your stack, just keep on counting! Whatever you're going to do initially, don't. Now I know what some of you are saying -- "Pastor, that sounds great, but I just can't do it." Oh yes you can! You say, "No, I just can't control my anger. When I get upset, I blow, and I just can't control it." But you can. Anger is a choice. You just don't want to control it.

Have you ever been in an argument at home and you're yelling and shouting, and all of a sudden, the telephone rings, and you lift the receiver and say, "Hell-o"! Oh pastor, it's good to hear your voice. What can I do for you?" I mean, instant transformation! You control what you want to control. The Bible says, "A wise man waits and lets his anger cool."

Look at this verse, Proverbs 12:16 (GN), "When a fool is annoyed, he quickly lets it be known. Smart people will ignore an insult." For some people everything is life and death. Have you noticed that? They can't ignore anything. You know the old saying, "A small pot boils quickly." And what you get upset over reveals the depth or shallowness of your character: How big or small a person you are.

Do you ever watch W.W.F. wrestling on Saturday mornings?! You know, Razor Ramon, Diesel, Bret Hart and the Head Shrinkers?! We all know, of course, that this buffoonery is 80% posturing and insult, and 20% wrestling. They point the finger at each other and pretend to be wildly upset!

Now what does it take to upset you? Look at Proverbs 19:11 (GN), "If you are sensible, you will control your temper. When someone wrongs you, it is a great virtue to ignore it." Maturity is the ability to overlook a hurt. Maturity is the ability to disregard it, to shrug it off, to play it down.

Surely the best example of this is Jesus. He was libeled. He was slandered, put down, and misunderstood; yet He never retaliated. The whole point of today's message is just to say this -- Nothing can make you angry; you choose to become angry. Put two people in the same situation: One becomes angry, the other doesn't. Why? It's the way they interpret the situation. It's the way they choose to respond to the circumstance. "You make me so mad!" No! Nothing and no one can make you mad. It's your choice to get angry. It's the way you respond.

Let me say to you teenagers and 20-to-30-year-olds -- if some little old lady with white hair pulls her old 1965 Chevy out in front of you never looking what's behind her and nearly causes an accident, don't get angry; just say to yourself, "Someday that's my mother!" It will give you an entirely new perspective!

You see, you need to ask this question when you're irritated: Write this down -- "Is this really a big deal? Is it worth being upset over?" Every minute that you're angry, you lose 60 seconds of happiness. "Is this thing worth giving up my happiness for?" You married people -- have you learned that some things aren't worth arguing over such as, "Should we have women ministers in the church?" You get this couple, and they're out to dinner, and the wife says, "I remember back in the summer of '82," and he says, "No, my dear, it was '81." "No, it was '82." "It was '81." "It was '82, and we had the green car." "No, dear, we never had a green car; it was a red car." Who cares?!

General George S. Patton wrote a book entitled, Patton's Principles for Managers Who Mean It. One of the laws in Patton's book is this: "Never fight a battle where you don't gain

anything by winning." Know what battles to fight and what battles aren't worth fighting. When someone wrongs you, it's a great virtue to just ignore it.

Proverbs 17:27 (GN) says, "People who stay calm have real insight." The more you understand, the more understanding you will be. That's the key to anger control. As a parent, the more I understand my children, the more I'm understanding of them. The more I understand my wife, the more I'm understanding of her. So it should be with the people with whom you work. Wisdom produces patience. So try to analyze your anger and say, "Why is this ticking me off? Why am I so upset?" Anger is never the problem. Anger is not just a warning light. There's a deeper issue that's not being met.

The Bible tells us that when you get angry, there may be several reasons:

- a. because you're hurt. Hurt causes anger. When I stubbed my toe getting out of bed the other morning, it hurt, and I said some very choice words like, "I'm uncomfortable"! Physical or emotional hurt causes anger.
- b. because you're frustrated. Frustration causes anger; when nothing seems to work; when you're forced to wait in a long line; when things don't go as planned.
- c. because you feel insecure. When you're threatened or afraid, or when your self-worth is attacked, then that causes anger.

When you chase an animal into a corner and it can't back up any further, it will start attacking you. That's what insecurity does. So, if you learn to deal with your hurt, your frustration, and your insecurity, then the anger reduces dramatically. That's why the Bible says, "People who stay calm have real insight." They say, "Why am I getting angry? Is it that I'm hurt, or frustrated or insecure?" Then they deal with one or all of these three issues.

So, you tame your temper by remembering the bad results, and you reflect before you react; and then

3. You RESTRAIN YOUR REMARKS. You watch your words. Proverbs 21:23 (GN) says, "If you want to stay out of trouble, be careful what you say." Folks, blowing your stack only creates air pollution! A sharp tongue is the quickest way to cut your own throat. You'd better use sweet words because you might have to eat them eventually! Watch what you say.

Now the problem is that words come very easily when we're angry; when the adrenalin is flowing. Have you noticed that? I've known people who were simply brilliant when they were angry! They could think of the most sarcastic things to say! And they no doubt thought that they were clever. But that kind of performance is foolishness because it erects an iron curtain between them and whoever the barbs were aimed at.

You have to watch what you say. Have you ever yelled at somebody and immediately regretted it? A friend of mine came home one day and his wife said, "I've been working all day and I got half the house cleaned." He looked around and said, "which half?" Now that means big trouble! Watch what you say. Proverbs says that if you're smart, you restrain your words.

Look at Proverbs 15:1 (GN), "A gentle answer quiets anger, but a harsh one stirs it up." He's saying, "Whatever you do, when you're angry, resist using sarcasm," because harsh words only escalate the problem while soft words de-escalate the tension.

"A gentle answer quiets anger..." Whose anger does it quiet? In the first place it quiets yours. Have you noticed that the louder you talk, the angrier you get?! If you want to turn down the anger, turn down the volume. When you get loud, your anger gets loud.

Now there's another principle that this verse teaches. It's very important to understand that anger is contagious. If you're angry at someone, he's going to get angry at you. So whatever you sow, you reap. If you sow harsh words, you're going to reap harsh words. "A gentle answer quiets anger, but a harsh one stirs it up."

It's a well-known fact that children learn from models they observe. Every time a parent loses his temper he's teaching his children how to get angry. You will reap what you sow. It is a law of life. Tommie Bolt, the famous golfer, had a short fuse. He was doing a clinic once, and he had his 14-year-old son with him. He thought he would show off, and he said, "Hey son, show them what I taught you." His son obediently pulled out a nine iron and tossed it at the sky! It's going to come back to haunt you!

Someone says, "But I've got all this anger inside me. What do I do with it? Push it down?" No. That's not healthy because when you swallow your anger, your stomach keeps score. "That burns me up!" Indeed it does! It produces burning acids that can produce stomach ulcers. It's not what you eat: It's what eats you that makes the difference.

So you don't repress it; that doesn't work. On the other hand, you don't express it either. There's some psychology today that says, "If you're angry, just vent it; be honest!" That's a great way to destroy a relationship because anger always alienates. So what do you do if you don't repress it, and you don't express it? The Bible says that you confess it. You admit it to God. You unload on the Lord.

If you want a model for this, read the Psalms; because in many of the Psalms, David is just sounding off. He's saying, "Lord, life stinks. I hate it. Why aren't you doing anything? Why don't you give a nuclear blast to my enemies?" At one point he says, "Why don't you break their teeth?" (Ps. 58:6) In another place he speaks about dashing his enemies' infants against the rocks (Ps. 137:9). And we say, "How can this be in the Bible? That doesn't seem to be the King David we know and love." Then all of a sudden, we realize that the Bible tells the truth. It tells the good and the bad. It never covers up or glosses over. It tells all the good things about David, but it also tells all his bad attitudes. God just lets David sound off -- He knows that David is just blowing off steam. He's really confessing his anger to God. And he gets it all out and then when it's all out of him, God can fill him with His love and His peace and His patience.

So admit all the anger and hurt, and then you're ready for God to fill you with those virtues that Paul speaks of in Galatians 5:22, especially "patience." "The fruit of the Spirit is... patience." The more God is in your life, the more patient you're going to be.

When you squeeze a tube of tooth paste, you expect tooth paste to come out. My point is: Whatever is inside of you is going to come out when you are put under pressure. When the world puts the squeeze on you, whatever is in you is going to come out.

Temper and tension go together. The more tension you experience, the more liable you are to lose your temper. when you're under a deadline; when you're feeling stressed out, your ability to handle your temper is much smaller than when you're not under tension.

Sometimes we feel like a glass filled to the brim with water. And any time someone pounds on the table, some of the water will spill over. When anyone or anything jostles us, anger can spill out and people around us get hurt.

Now what does God want to do? He wants to take that glass, and He wants to pour out all the anger and the hurt and the stress, and He wants to fill you with His love and joy and peace and power and patience; and when God is in control, those virtues become increasingly evident; and then when the world puts the squeeze on you, what will come out is peace and patience and all the other fruit of the Spirit.

How does God help us with our anger? By dealing with the root problems. Anger is not the root problem, as I've said. It's a warning light that you're hurt or frustrated or insecure. Jesus wants to work on these three things

1. **He wants to heal your hurt with His love.** You may have been unloved, even abused and rejected. But Jesus cares. Your pain matters to God. He wants to replace that hurt with His love, because when you stop hurting, you'll stop hurting others, and you'll be able to love because that's what you're filled with.

2. **Christ also wants to replace your frustration with His Peace** -- the peace that passes all understanding -- peace in the midst of chaos. It's not peace without chaos: It's peace in the middle of chaos. When you're filled with His peace, then the frustration reduces.

3. **Christ wants to replace your insecurity with His power.** When you realize how loved you are by God, and how He has a plan for your life, and He's in control of your life, then you find your insecurity level going down, and with it, the anger dissipates. When someone insults you and puts you down, it doesn't matter all that much because you say, "If I like me, and God likes me; if you don't like me, you've got a problem." That is the kind of confidence that lowers the temper in your life: You don't feel threatened by anyone anymore because you know that your value comes from God.

AMEN.