

Sermon 47: 1 Corinthians 13:6: Love Covers Over a Multitude of Sins

OUTLINE

A long fuse
A short memory

INTRODUCTION

One of the greatest enemies to love is anger and our world is full of anger. We live in a world of road rage, where strangers who inconvenience us or dare to challenge us on the roads cause a volcanic eruption of rage. We live in a world of on-line rage and tribalism, where people divide into mutually exclusive groups, guaranteeing an us and them mentality; polarization, where we don't merely have differing opinions but we are on opposite extremes where all differences are apocalyptic, all differences of opinion are conflicts of mortal enemies, and all social discourse has devolved to insults and roasts and a willing misrepresentation of our opponents views and character as we slander them to appeal to our base. We live in a world where the word 'triggered' once described a physical reaction, but in our world where everyone is a victim and everyone has trauma, the Cambridge Dictionary lists the first definition as 'experiencing a strong emotional reaction of fear, shock, anger, or worry, especially because you are made to remember something bad that has happened in the past.' In sad jesting we talk about 'trigger warnings' because we live in a culture that have become professionals at getting offended. Another word betraying this problem is the word 'microaggressions.' Because of the emergence of the idea of intersectionality, and how we are all victims in intersecting and compounding ways, we have perfected the art of being victims. 'Microaggressions' is defined as 'a statement, action, or incident regarded as an instance of indirect, subtle, or unintentional discrimination against members of a marginalized group.' An unintentional exclusion is now termed as an act of violence and threat, a microaggression. Victimhood is the new excuse to be angry, to protest, to rant, to ruin someone's business, name and life. Anger is evident today in the new culture of rioting that has arisen, of sit ins, of public disruptions. Racially driven anger; economic and power dynamic driven anger; which public person you follow and whose opinions you endorse driven anger; these versions of sinful anger and more were alive and well in the Corinthian church as they are today.

Paul seeing this problem of anger in the Corinthian church goes on in his list of what love is and is not says, 1 Cor. 13:5c, 'it is not irritable or resentful.' This pairing has to do with how quickly we get offended and angry and how slowly we stop being angry and let go of it, forgiving it. I have called this sermon, Love Covers Over a Multitude of Sins, a quote from 1 Pet. 4:8 based on Proverbs 10:12. We have two points to unpack this. Firstly, love has a long fuse; secondly love has a short memory.

A long fuse

'it is not irritable.' The Greek word here is where we get the word 'paroxysm'. Other English translations are 'is not provoked' or 'is not easily angered'. Love is not stirred up to anger; it is not easily baited to bite down in response; or in modern terms it is not waiting to pounce waiting to be triggered. All hatred begins with anger, hatred is the opposite of love and this is why Jesus warns us about our anger, Matt. 5:22-23, "'You have heard that it was said to those of old,

‘You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.’²² But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ will be liable to the hell of fire.’ Jesus warns us about anger in the heart as well as anger expressed as sins that violates the 6th commandment.

Now before we talk about sinful anger we first need to talk about godly anger. We could get the impression from Eph. 4:31 that all anger is sinful, ‘Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice.’ But we need to remember that just a few verses earlier in 4:26, Paul wrote, ‘Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger.’ God has a holy anger that is rightly against all that is sinful. Adam in the Garden would have had a holy capacity for anger and should have been angry at the devil’s lies and accusations of God and acted in justice against the snake but did not. Jesus who was a sinless human being likewise had godly anger, Jesus was silent as lamb when He suffered personal injury, or for the sake of His mission; but was a lion when His holy anger moved Him to be zealous for God’s house as a house of prayer for the nations when He cleansed the temple; or when He pronounced His prophetic woes against the Scribes and the Pharisees who had perverted true religion and burdened God’s own people. The anger that Paul is talking about here is not godly anger of that type, but the selfish, proud, envious, entitled, prejudiced, self-justifying, self-pitying, irrational, unprincipled anger that we do as sinners.

I must confess, I do hesitate to even talk about the possibility of godly anger, not because it is not right to be angry at the right things; in the right way; to the right extent. No, it is because so many Christians are angry; and sinful in their anger and gloss over any close self-examination silencing any guilt they may feel about their anger as they justify it as righteous anger. There are 3 Vs that we can remember to help us avoid being blind to our own anger. Anger is the sin of the villain, the victim, and the virtuous. The first is easy, it is our default way of thinking, bad people are angry people. I am not a bad person therefore my anger is not that sort of anger. There is an anger that is obviously wrong, the anger of the murderer, the racist, the war criminal, the psychopath. There is the anger of the one who refuses to reason, who refuses to see their own wrong, who acts out of all proportion to the offence, who refuses to exercise any form of self-control and fuels their rage with lies and half-truths, anything that will stir their emotions to the point of boiling over. This is the anger of the villain, and for most of us it is very rare that we get angry like this. Teenagers hand themselves over to anger in this way; drunk people hand themselves over to anger in this way; those who are addicts who have worn down all walls of self-control are loose cannons that destruction follows wherever they go, Prov. 25:28, ‘A man without self-control is like a city broken into and left without walls.’ And sadly sometimes even frustrated parents resort to this type of anger. The abusive parent gets from 0-100 in record time every time. They are the opposite to God who is the perfect parent who is slow to anger. These are the people that we think have an anger problem but not us.

However anger is not only the sin of the villain but also the sin of the victim. Because sin is not original and hijacks something good, sinful anger is close on the heels of righteous anger, and this is no more true than in the case of the victim. They are a genuine victim, an injustice has been done to them, even if it is partly their own fault the backlash was out of proportion and unfair. We can

claim that our anger is against the sin in the situation not because of our own self-interest, but here is the test to see if this is true. Are you as angry that God is not glorified and sin has been allowed to triumph when it happens to your enemy not only yourself? If your heart said something like 'But they deserve it' and not 'it is sin no matter who suffers it,' you can know that self-interest has intruded into your anger. If you are angry when your political party or opinion is mishandled in a biased way by a news carrier and you are fuming and shouting out about the injustice; but are gleeful when the same news carrier does the same to the opposition, then you are not truly concerned about the truth and what is just, but only about your self-interest.

Anger is also a sin of the virtuous. Many religious people are very angry people. Legalists who see the splinters in others eyes give vent to their righteous anger when they see sin in others but their anger is hypocritical because they are never so angry at themselves. Remember the sons of thunder who wanted to call down fire from heaven to consume an unbelieving Samaritan village, Luke 9:54. It is so easy to get angry at other people's sins.

But our anger is not so neat, or predictable, or rational. We can easily see rather than our anger running in the proper channels of being angry at the right things like sin and injustice, at the right time, for the right length, to the right degree, our anger is selfish and irrational. We can get angry at those who are doing things that are right and for our good but which are inconvenient, that go against our desires, and delay our gratification. We have all been guilty of this type of anger when we have railed against our parents. Contrary to our enraged opinions parents are not malicious kill joys who are especially targeting you for harm and in spite spending all their energy bent on hindering you from what is good and right. Parents are fallible well intended wiser and older people doing their best. But our anger is only concerned when our will is crossed, our gratification denied, and our plans denied. Ultimately all sinful anger is driven by our selfishness. James 4:1-2, 'What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? ² You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask.' Where does anger come from? It arises out of our sinful hearts. The next time you get angry ask yourself, what desire is not being satisfied that is making me angry right now? The Bible tells us that our selfish insistence upon our own desires and will being satisfied is the root of all of our anger. Why does the sullen teenager get angry at their parents? It is possible that the anger is legitimate that it is because the parents are unjust. But more often than not we pretend that we are the victim to stoke the fire of our anger. In what world is having a snapchat account a basic human right that it is unjust to deny? Is the ability to binge watch Netflix through the night a basic human need that ought not to be denied? Why can't I start dating at the age of 14 with no prospect of marriage in the near future? Our selfish desires and the story we tell ourselves that we are right and are being victimized by those who hold all the power is the fuel we feed our anger with until it blows up in everyone's face. But let us not pick on teenagers, what about angry parents. What selfish desire do you have that is fueling the fire of your anger? Some instances of your anger may be legitimate as you are dealing with someone who is just being selfish. But getting angry because your afternoon nap was disturbed, or getting angry because your quiet evening was disrupted because you had to take your child somewhere, or getting angry because your child's behavior has embarrassed you. These are also sinful reasons for anger that can feed into eruptions of anger against our children. Or the anger that spouses harbor against each other. I want a better looking spouse, I want a

spouse who is more conscientious of my personal desires, I want a spouse who is willing to sacrifice for what I want, I want a spouse who meets my sexual needs, these and many more are the things that drive our anger against our spouse, selfishness too often drives anger. As someone else has put it, don't trust your anger. We are self-deluding narcissists, don't believe that your anger is an inerrant guide. Recognize that almost all of our anger is from a heart that is selfish and willing to believe ourselves the victim in any story.

The word in our text is 'irritable,' which centers in on not being slow to anger but having a hair trigger, allowing any annoyance to disturb your peace and manifest your anger. Think about how destructive this is. Let me say a word to parents for a moment. What is the home environment like when a parent is short tempered, when the least thing irritates them, anytime they are having a bad day everyone has to have a bad day? This creates a deep sense of insecurity in the home because no one knows whether mom or dad is having a good day or a bad day. On a good day they are all smiles and generous, on a bad day even good things set them off, any sound is unwelcome, all responses are biting and harsh. What happens in a home if parents carry on this way? Well firstly no one wants to be home, it is not a safe place but a hostile environment. But the children start walking around on egg shells withdrawing because they don't know what will set their unpredictable parent off. Humour and laughter disappear, children being loud and playing freely gets stifled, the other parent has to apply either an overindulgent overcompensation or imitates the harshness of the angry parent. A hostile environment is created to control, or punish or manipulate. When it comes to discipline there will be no consistency, no gentleness, no follow up, no prayer and biblical admonition. And children will then imitate their parents and treat their siblings in the same way. Spouses can weaponized anger in the same way; bosses can weaponized anger in the same way.

Why is love not angry? Love is patient with what it cherishes, it will endure much for its treasures. Anger is ill will towards what it perceives to be an enemy, but love has good will to what it has taken for its love. Anger tears down but love builds up, for this reason love will not be irritable and short and harsh and explosive. Love is concerned that the other is benefitted from themselves. A perfect picture of this is Stephen. Acts 7:59-60, 'And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." ⁶⁰ And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." And when he had said this, he fell asleep.' Stephen we know has a glorious sight of Jesus as the Son of Man at the right hand of the Father, in the position to judge. And even while Stephen is dying, his thoughts are directed towards his people the Jews, and he seeks their good even though they are murdering him. he asks that this sin not be held against them. In the likeness of his Saviour, He is not angry with those who are unjustly killing him but loving them. I always wonder what goes through the mind at a time like this to enable such selflessness. Indulge me as I make some suggestions. Stephen was dying but he was confronted with a reality that is more impacting than his death. He sees Jesus, resurrected from the dead; the Messiah on His throne; one seated at the right hand of the Father who conquered death and ascended into heaven leaving the task of evangelizing an unworthy world offering them the ability to be forgiven because Jesus had died. He saw His Savior standing sensed His personal concern for him ready to welcome him home. Seeing Him in this role he would be reminded that the Savior is also a judge and as surely as He is resurrected He will judge. This Savior who was treated the same way, who was killed by unbelieving Jews who should have been the first to believe. This Savior who had

prayed for His own murderers. Something of this must have been going around in his mind which enabled a radical selflessness. Apart from seeing the Savior, everything that Stephen would have been thinking should be our way of thinking as well. We know Christ is resurrected, that He has defeated death, that He is seated at the right hand of the Father and all authority in heaven and on earth is His, we know His personal presence and His personal interest in us as His sheep, we too know of His example, and have the same certainty of a warm welcome into His presence. We too know the certainty of judgement and that the sins of those who persecute His people are guaranteed justice. We too see Christ's death and prayer for those who persecuted Him as our example. We too can love our enemies, and not indulge our anger by praying for those who persecute us. If we stop and in prayer consider these matters our hearts are more ready to give love than return anger.

A short memory

Next Paul tells us that love is not resentful. You will notice that the ESV has a footnote there which opens up some of what is meant by this second word, 'and does not count up wrongdoing.' This is a very important nuance that we must see. Other translations have 'keeps no record of wrongs.' The Greek word here is an accounting term, the same term that we use to translate as 'impute/reckon/count.' Paul uses the same expression in 2 Cor. 5:19, that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.' And Romans 4:8, 'blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin.' Accounting is a very important skill you need to run a good business, but accounting skills in relationships are not as useful. If you have a little black book, a ledger where you store up the memories of all the things that have been done against you or you thought should have not been done for you, then you are acting in the opposite way to love. Sadly our ledgers are the best kept books we have, we do not keep a tally of what we owe others so well as what they owe us. We have an eidetic memory for grievances, we can remember the date and place, we can recount wounds from least to greatest in chronological and alphabetical order.

As soon as we see the word for 'count' we cannot help but think of God's dealing with us in the gospel. He did not count our sins against us, He counted them against Christ. He took what we deserve and paid it in full fitting the bill Himself. It is like when you steal from me and I forgive you. I don't count the debt as yours, but someone still has to pay. If you rob me of 10 000 dollars and I let you off, I still have to pay 10 000 dollars in losses. God fitted the bill to pay for our sins. Our sins were forgiven, but He still had to pay. Now here we are and people are sinning against us, we have a choice, will we demand payment, will we keep a record to extract our due, or will we let them off? If we let them off we still suffer the loss, the injustice, their thoughtlessness. Letting them off doesn't mean there is no pinch in it for us, it means that we do not demand payment in return. I imagine that this is Paul's way of speaking to what he said in 1 Cor. 6:7 concerning lawsuits, 'To have lawsuits at all with one another is already a defeat for you. Why not rather suffer wrong? Why not rather be defrauded?' Our translation chose 'resentment' to indicate the long lingering and consuming anger where we refuse to let it go, to be reconciled, to put it away. Love has a short memory for grievances not a well kept ledger.

I do wonder whether Paul had Psalm 103 in his head as he reflected on this list.

The Lord is merciful and gracious,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

⁹ He will not always chide,
nor will he keep his anger forever.

¹⁰ He does not deal with us according to our sins,
nor repay us according to our iniquities.

¹¹ For as high as the heavens are above the earth,
so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him;

¹² as far as the east is from the west,
so far does he remove our transgressions from us.'