

There’s a story about the great artist Leonardo da Vinci that goes something like this: one day he was working on his painting “The Last Supper” and, for some reason, became very angry with someone who was watching him work. He lost his temper and lashed out at the other person with harsh and cutting words. Returning to his canvas, Leonardo attempted to work on the face of Jesus but was so upset that he could not compose himself to do it. Finally, he put down his tools, located the person he had mistreated, and asked for forgiveness. The apology was accepted, forgiveness was offered, and Leonardo was able to return to his studio and finish painting the face of Christ.

Does any of that sound familiar to you? Da Vinci became angry, expressed that anger in an explosive, destructive manner, and then realized that he had not really settled the matter with the other person, or himself. His energy was diverted, his attention distracted, and he could not work with his whole heart. It was only after he apologized for the way he expressed his anger that he could feel like himself and get back to work again, which in his case meant looking Jesus right in the face.

What do you do with your anger? Many Christians struggle not only with how to express anger, but whether to express anger at all. But as author John Powell writes, “When I repress anger, my stomach keeps score.” Our language is full of phrases like that. A person is a ‘pain in the neck.’ A situation is ‘a real headache.’ If you try to deny or hide anger, your body tells you the truth.

To further complicate things, when we do express anger, we often choose ways that are destructive. This often takes the form of a sarcastic comment, which is walked back with “I was just kidding,” after the damage has been done. Or there’s the volcano method, where a person just erupts, burning the people around him or her with vicious words or aggressive actions. It’s no wonder that anger is a source of much fear and apprehension, and it’s no wonder that we try to avoid it in others...and ourselves.

However, the Bible says something extraordinary about anger that you and I do well to explore. In Paul’s letter to the Ephesians he writes “Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil.” For people not sure what to do with their anger, this is groundbreaking. This gives us incredible *permission* and incredible *control* in the Spirit of God. This Biblical word says that there are ways to express your anger that are not wrong. Being angry is not wrong, in and of itself. There are situations where anger is completely appropriate. If you see something good being mistreated, it is right to be angry. Think of Jesus driving the moneychangers out of the temple. He was angry about the abuses that were taking place in his Father’s house of worship. It wasn’t wrong for him to feel that way. Wrongness comes in the way you choose to express your anger. That’s where you can quickly veer into sin, and as Paul says, ‘give the devil an opportunity’ to exploit it—to throw gas on the fire of your anger. Jesus had perfect control over his anger. He was able to express it in a way that was not harmful to anyone *and* that did not violate God’s Law. That’s where he has an advantage over

us. Still, if you cultivate a connection with him, here's what happens. Not only does he forgive you when you lose control of your anger, but he gives you a new way to be. He builds new ways of thinking and speaking into you. They are his ways. As you depend on Jesus for these new ways, he gives you incredible permission and incredible control to deal with anger head-on. Let's look at some practical ways that we can live out God's Word: "Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil."

The first one is right there at the beginning of the verse. "Be angry." Incredible permission. When you feel angry, own it. It just takes a second. Admit that you are angry, and pledge that you will express your anger in a responsible and respectful way. At best, it is a waste of time of time to deny your anger, and at worst it is self-destructive. Own it. Admit it. Once you do, you take control of it, with the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Again, the full phrase is, "Be angry and do not sin..." That's our greatest challenge, but it's one that Jesus helps us meet. With the incredible control that he makes available, we can feel anger, yet avoid hurting others in return. One way to exercise self-control is to stick to the issue.

For example, let's say you have a good relationship with a friend that has lasted for years. But lately, that friend has been kidding you about being overweight. It seems like they're doing it more and more, and while you try to take things in stride, the truth is it is really starting to get to you. A self-controlled response would sound like this: "I've been getting annoyed lately by your comments about my weight. I'd like it if you would stop joking about it."

There's a number of things going on there that we don't have a lot of time to get into: So just notice that a self-controlled response focuses on your reaction—not any other person's or group of people; a self-controlled response avoids labelling, name calling, and sarcasm; and it stays in the here and now, not bringing up past performance or negative personal history.

"Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil." One of the incredible options God gives us when we are angry is the option of giving the other person a chance to respond and listening carefully to that response. As humbling as it may be, it is possible that my anger may be based on erroneous information or a mistaken perception. It may be possible that I am getting angry because of a situation that exists only in my head. Active, respectful listening allows the truth to be discovered, and even though it's embarrassing sometimes, that is far better than letting your anger carry you away for no good reason.

One more way to exercise self-control is to pray about your anger. And I want to be extremely clear on this point: I'm not saying pray to God to take away your anger; might be more comfortable. Instead, ask God to reveal to you what is behind your anger. What's underneath it? What is so important to you that you would react in anger? Also, pray to God to protect you from overresponding aggressively when you are angry—or underresponding in a passive way. God can and will give you incredible control precisely when you need it, and you invite that into yourself when you pray about it.

“Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger...” I just wanted spend a moment on the second part of that phrase. It’s a great image. Don’t let the sun go down on your anger. Don’t let the day go by without expressing your anger, and if possible, best case scenario, resolving the situation through reconciliation. Sincere apology and sincere forgiveness is the goal, always. Once again, this speaks to the incredible control that you have access to in the Spirit of God. “Do not let the sun go down on your anger” means the choice is yours. You can let you anger rule over you, or you can rule over your anger to the degree that you set a time limit for it. Do not let the sun go down on your anger. Have you ever thought of dealing with anger this way?

To circle back to the story that opened this message: Leonardo da Vinci could not look the painted image of Jesus in the face until he went and made reconciliation. But let me suggest to you that when it comes to handling anger, the face of Jesus is exactly where you need to look. This is the face that looked at those who crucified him and said, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” This is the face of your brother, who knows what it is like to be mistreated; betrayed; deeply hurt; and yet chose to keep loving. This is the face of our God, who looks at you not in anger, but with delight. Jesus is your source of incredible permission, incredible control, and incredible forgiveness.