

My first day of grad school was pretty scary. For college, I had gone to a small Christian college in Southwest Missouri. But for grad school, I went to the University of Missouri, which is a pretty huge public university. And I went from being one of a few dozen Christians in my class to usually the only Evangelical Christian in my class. I was sitting outside the classroom for my first class with a couple of the other students (who would soon become my new friends), and they were talking about who they thought we'd be reading in this class. They were throwing out name after name of people I'd never heard. I immediately got worried... was I in over my head?

Those first few weeks were rough. I knew way less than my classmates and was playing a lot of catch-up. I felt in some ways that my Christian college education hadn't prepared me as well for this work as their public school education had. But also in those first weeks, my new friends started jokingly referring to me as the 'token Christian'. Someone said, "Every religion department needs a Christian, and JR. is ours," and it just sort of stuck.

But that name - token Christian - actually helped me out a lot. It gave me confidence because it carved out a space for me in the department. It was okay if I didn't know something because I wasn't just another first year student. I was the token Christian student. I wasn't nervous to give my input because now it was okay if I sounded like a Christian - I was the token Christian! Being the token Christian helped me get through my first year of grad school.

Then I met Tom.

Tom started my second year. And in our first class, he introduced himself as a guy from a small Christian college in Northeast Missouri who had come to get a more well-rounded education.

I hated him instantly.

After class, I was with my grad school friends, and I commented on what a jerk Tom was. They were genuinely confused. Tom had seemed, to them, like a kind, genuine and friendly person. I wasn't hearing it. As far as I was concerned, Tom was the worst.

Which is a terrible thing, isn't it?

I want to talk about anger with you this morning - why we get angry and how to tell whether our anger is righteous or evil. It's pretty obvious that my anger toward Tom was not the righteous kind - that's because he was challenging my identity as the token Christian. So when we're talking about anger, we're really talking about identity.

Today is about who we are, and how we can learn to listen for God's voice speaking to us in our anger. Today is going to be about healing and freedom. So let's begin by singing together!

Message

We're beginning a series today called *Empathy for the Devil*. We're going to meet six of the worst villains in the Bible and asking, "Why did they do what they did?" We're not looking to apologize or make excuses for them. We simply want to practice some empathy - put ourselves in their shoes. Because ultimately, we'll discover we're more like them than we thought, and reflecting on their sin will illuminate the seeds of those same sins in our own lives.

[Scripture Slide 1] So let's talk about Cain, of Cain and Able. Cain is infamous for being the first murderer. He killed his own brother. Let's read his story in Genesis 4. This is the first story Genesis gives us after the first man and woman are exiled from the Garden of Eden. We know God has provided for them, and now they live east of Eden.

Now Adam had sexual relations with his wife, Eve, and she became pregnant. When she gave birth to Cain, she said, "With the LORD's help, I have produced a man!" Later she gave birth to his brother and named him Abel.

When they grew up, Abel became a shepherd, while Cain cultivated the ground. When it was time for the harvest, Cain presented some of his crops as a gift to the LORD. Abel also brought a gift—the best portions of the firstborn lambs from his flock. The LORD accepted Abel and his gift, but he did not accept Cain and his gift. This made Cain very angry, and he looked dejected.

"Why are you so angry?" the LORD asked Cain. "Why do you look so dejected? You will be accepted if you do what is right. But if you refuse to do what is right, then watch out! Sin is crouching at the door, eager to control you. But you must subdue it and be its master."

One day Cain suggested to his brother, "Let's go out into the fields." And while they were in the field, Cain attacked his brother, Abel, and killed him. -- Genesis 4:1-8

God rejects Cain's offering, so Cain gets angry. He kills his brother in retaliation. Seems pretty cut and dry. The moral of the story is... don't be a hothead like Cain. Cain was a bad guy from the beginning - that's why God rejected his offering in the first place. Plenty of interpreters and commentators assume this is why Cain is mad - that he's a bad guy, that he didn't offer God the best of his crops (while Able did offer the best of his flocks) and so that's why God rejected his offering.

But there seems to be more going on here. Because after Cain got angry, God appeared to him and asked,

"Why are you so angry?" the LORD asked Cain. "Why do you look so dejected? You will be accepted if you do what is right."

God wants to know why Cain is angry. Except it's God, and God knows why Cain is angry... so maybe this question is really more for Cain than it is for us. Cain doesn't know why he's been rejected. And... here's the thing... God says Cain hasn't been rejected. God says, "If you do what is right, you will be accepted."

So God not accepting Cain's offering isn't the same as not accepting Cain, somehow. What is God doing?

For that, we need to go back to the beginning of Cain's story:

Now Adam had sexual relations with his wife, Eve, and she became pregnant. When she gave birth to Cain, she said, "With the LORD's help, I have produced a man!" Later she gave birth to his brother and named him Abel.

Cain's the first child born to Adam and Eve. Remember - they've just learned they're not going to live forever like God intended for them. Because they chose to sin, they chose to be mortal. They have an expiration date now. Their only hope for immortality is... children.

So when Eve gives birth to a son, he is the embodiment of all their hopes and dreams. He is proof that death is not the end for them, a promise that their names will live on. So she gives him a name, "Cain". It means "Strength" or "Spear". She holds him in her arms, and declares, "With God's help, I have produced a MAN!"

This is Cain. Strength.

Oh, and then Eve had another child. She named him Abel, which means 'vapor'. It's what Hebrews call that mist the Sun burns from the earth every morning.

Cain is strength, power, life for his family. Abel is vapor that exists just for a moment.

Not hard to imagine that family dynamic, is it? Who the favorite son is?

And just try to put yourself in Cain's place for a moment. His whole life, he's been #1. The responsible one. The important one. The carrier of all his parents hopes and dreams.

He built his identity around being the firstborn (just like in grad school, I built my identity around being the token Christian). Being the firstborn, the STRENGTH of the family, gave him a sense of place and purpose.

Then, for some reason, God took that away from him. God chose Able. The vapor. The mist. The meaningless.

Instead of Cain.

And Cain *lost* it.

We get angry when someone challenges our identity. Anger is an emotion that's triggered when something isn't the way it's supposed to be. Psychologists call it a "secondary emotion". That means that anger is always triggered by a deeper emotion.

Think of anger like a warning light on your car dashboard. The light isn't the problem. It's a sign that there's a deeper problem you need to look into. You should (sooner rather than later, probably), stop and check under the hood.

When we do that - stop when we're angry, sometimes we figure out that the anger is being caused by our sense of justice. The anger we feel when someone hurts someone we care about. The anger we feel about racism, injustice, human trafficking. The anger is triggered by the sense that things are not how they're supposed to be in the world.

But obviously that's not *always* the case. The anger I felt toward Tom in grad school was not that kind of anger. Neither was the anger Cain felt toward his brother.

And that's the problem with anger - it's an emotion. And emotions by definition are non-rational. We don't *think* our emotions. We *feel* them. It doesn't matter if it doesn't make sense. We'll still get angry or happy or sad or whatever.

Anger is irrational.

Our warning light can flash even if what's wrong is something inside us - an insecurity, fear or unresolved issue. I got mad at Tom because he threatened by identity as the token Christian in my grad school program. Cain got mad at Able because he was suddenly number 2 when he'd been number 1 his whole life.

And this is why God comes to Cain, why he says, **“Why are you so angry?” the LORD asked Cain. “Why do you look so dejected? You will be accepted if you do what is right. But if you refuse to do what is right, then watch out! Sin is crouching at the door, eager to control you. But you must subdue it and be its master.”**

God is calling Cain to take a time out. To sit with his anger and figure out WHY ARE YOU ANGRY? What's underneath that anger, Cain? Is it something holy? God warns him: be careful... you're at a crossroads. You can choose to do right, and you'll be accepted. But Sin is crouching at your door like a lion. It wants to devour you.

But you can master it. You don't have to give into your anger.

A few years ago, I was visiting my best friend. His son was about 2 at the time, and playing with one of those toys where you put the differently shaped blocks into their matching holes. He had the wrong

hole, and he got super frustrated. He started screaming. SO my friend called to him and said, "Hey buddy... don't freak out. Figure it out!"

Don't freak out. Figure it out. I laughed in the moment - it's such a great, pithy saying. But it's stayed with me. Because when we get angry, we tend to freak out. Like Cain, we tend to lash out, punishing those around us without stopping to examine whether the problem might be *inside* us.

And friends, this is sin.

[Scripture slide 2] Turn over to Matthew 5 with me. This is part of Jesus' famous Sermon on the Mount. I know we want to push back at this point and say, "Hey... don't compare me to Cain!" I might have a temper, but I've never murdered anyone. I don't get violent when I'm angry."

Which is good. But there is something that anger can do inside us when it's not checked. And Jesus warns us that it is the same essential sin as murder:

You have heard that our ancestors were told, 'You must not murder. If you commit murder, you are subject to judgment.' But I say, if you are even angry with someone, you are subject to judgment! If you call someone an idiot, you are in danger of being brought before the court. And if you curse someone, you are in danger of the fires of hell.

So if you are presenting a sacrifice at the altar in the Temple and you suddenly remember that someone has something against you, leave your sacrifice there at the altar. Go and be reconciled to that person. Then come and offer your sacrifice to God. -- Matthew 5:21-24

According to Jesus, when we allow our anger to sever our relationships with others, we're committing the same sin as murder. I think on some level, we know this because what do we say when we cut someone off? "They're dead to me."

We've murdered them in our hearts. We've severed relationship. We've closed down any channels they have for teaching us, contributing to our lives. And that's deadly because God created us to be in relationship with each other. When we allow anger to render someone dead to us, we're working against God's way. We miss out on life.

We need to stop. Don't freak out. Figure out.

Speaking of which... that best friend who coined that phrase? That's Tom... the guy from grad school I was convinced was a total jerk. It turned out my friends were right - he's actually an amazing guy - kind, friendly, generous and funny. It took me longer than it should have to realize Tom wasn't a threat to my position, that in fact his friendship made me a better person, more confident and able to navigate the tricky waters of my education than ever.

Tom was the best man in my wedding. I'm the godfather to his children. He continues to pastor me to this day. I am the person I am today in large part because of his influence.

And I almost missed all of that because I was caught up in being the 'token Christian' in a program that lasted *three years* of my life. How sad to have missed out on a life-long brotherhood because I couldn't get over myself. Thanks be to God for not allowing me to stay trapped in a prison of my own anger.

Friends, anger is not sin. Anger is an emotion God created in us, to signal us that something is very wrong. But our anger is dumb. It can't tell the difference between good reasons to be angry and wrong reasons to be angry (which shouldn't be surprising - how often do we struggle with that very problem?)

So when we get angry, we need to hear the words God said to Cain: "Why are you angry? Sin is crouching at your door. Don't let it master you." We need to hear the words of my friend Tom, who is not in fact a jerk: "Don't freak out. Figure out."

Because when we learn to listen to our anger, when we learn to discern what's going on beneath the hood, so to speak, we find the life God created us to live. A life lived in communion with each other and with God.

Communion + Examen

[Communion Slide] Jesus invites us to be reconciled with each other as we are reconciled with God.

1. When in the last week did I listen to God speaking through my anger?
2. When in the last week did I act out of anger?
3. When in the next week will I be tempted to act out of anger?
4. How can I pause and listen to God's invitation in my anger this week?

Assignment/Blessing

Take time to sit with your anger this week. Why are you angry?