Good morning. For those of you that don’t know me, my name is Matt, and I am the director of youth and outreach here at Eagle Ridge and I have the pleasure of speaking with you today. We are 3 weeks into a series about Anger called The Anger Pandemic. And I love this title because I feel like that’s exactly what anger is… it’s a pandemic. And as I thought more about this concept of a pandemic a few interesting comparisons came to mind:

1. It’s something that is easily passed on to other people we come into contact with.
2. One of the best ways to stop the spread is by being quarantined.
3. Like most viruses, there is no outright cure – just things we can do to manage the symptoms and “get through it.”
4. And if you got it bad enough, it can kill you. (and we’ll talk more about that later).

One stark difference that is so absurd and ridiculous when you hear it but also simultaneously so true that it makes you want to cry is… With this disease… with this “virus”… we often WANT to pass it on to others. We want others to be angry about what we’re angry about – or at least feel our anger so they understand what we’re feeling.

Now, one of the things we’ve spoken about in both of the previous weeks that I think is worth repeating is that anger, as an emotional reaction or feeling, is NOT bad. There is nothing wrong with being or getting angry, it is a human emotion that God blessed us with so that we could feel things more deeply and respond. HOWEVER, after the fall, when sin got involved and our flesh was unleashed, that perfect human emotion that God designed became a gateway to some pretty messed up things. The emotion itself isn’t the problem, its how we respond and what we do when we are experiencing it that is the problem. It’s how we hold onto it and carry it with us that is the problem. And it’s the same with any emotion Love, Joy, Sadness, as so on.. All of these emotions are pure and good – until sin gets involved, corrupts how we respond to them or while experiencing them, and they can lead to…. sinful expressions Love… or addiction issues to continually experience Joy… or disconnectedness or bitterness as a result of Sadness…

Our sin nature, when combined with the perfectly created emotion of Anger, unfortunately, can lead to some very destructive consequences. And not just for those around us… but for us too.

So, that is what we are going to discuss today – how that sinful nature that we all have corrupts anger into something that ultimately leads to destruction. And, what we can do about it. But let’s start with the source of this anger and work our way to the problem…

In the last couple of weeks Pastor Bill and Deb spoke about how Anger is usually the result of a fear or anxiety we are experiencing. In almost all situations when someone is angry you can ask the question “What are you afraid of?” and if they can stop and calm themselves long enough to think rationally… they might be able to actually figure it out. BUT, I wouldn’t count on it.

OK, so, that’s how fear and anger come about… now let’s talk about how they affect you and the situation.

You see, fear, anxiety, anger – these emotions are actually for our good – Like I said earlier – they were created with purpose for our lives and for our benefit. Fear keeps us alive, Anger helps us fight to stay alive, and anxiety (in small appropriate doses) helps us make decisions that are best for us. BUT, when we experience these emotions things happen in our brain. Our frontal cortex, the part of the brain where we can reason, and rationalize, and consider WHY we are afraid and WHAT the root cause of our anger might be – is shut off. Instead, the amygdala is active and firing on all cylinders. AND FOR GOOD REASON. If you are out in the wilderness and a hungry lion approaches (picture of dangerous looking lion) – you DON’T HAVE TIME to reason why you might be afraid, or philosophize about whether or not your life is more valuable than the life of that lion, or even the horrible choices that led you to be alone in the wilderness where you encountered a lion! What you do have time to do is figure out if you are going to be able to fight that lion off or run away – and do it fast! This fight or flight response keeps us alive and helps us. Hopefully.

So, if I’m having an argument with my wife over something (usually pointless and silly) and I’m truly angry about it – then my ability to reason and rationalize and consider my motives… really just isn’t possible. Instead, my brain is focused on one of the following options: How do I inflict as much damage as possible OR How do I avoid this fight altogether and get out of here.

Now, there’s two interesting things that happen in this situation: The first is that generally when you are arguing with your spouse about something ridiculous, your frontal cortex doesn’t completely shut down and your amygdala doesn’t completely take over. So, we are – most of the time – capable of SOME rational thought and reasoning. Of course, we don’t often use this part of our brain to help the situation, it usually is just used to help us “win” the argument or inflict more damage.

The second interesting thing that happens is that when our amygdala is activated it releases special chemical into our bodies that are part of that fight or flight response. These chemicals tell our organs to shut down, our metabolism to burn faster to produce more energy, and our muscles get “super charged” in a way that allows us to… well… fight or run away effectively. So, not only are we a bit “out of control” but we are at our most dangerous. Not a great combo.

But, that’s just an example of a small argument, sometimes we experience other hurts and pains in our lives that cause lasting damage. These things cause something to take root and grow inside of us. Anger over time, unchecked, and carried with us develops into Bitterness.

Story of my childhood.

4’11” and “smart”

Not super athletic, but skilled in other areas.

Immature – the world revolved around me – only my perspective.

Bullies picked on me – my response – I was vicious. And they “deserved it”

Senior year – I made a decision. I would not “care” about the things that stressed me out. Not in an apathetic way… in a New attitude kind of way “Everyone is else is an idiot.” It created a new way to cope with the world around me. I no longer felt personally attacked or targeted – so I could brush it off and not let my ego be hurt… I just decided that I was better than everyone else. And my strengths reinforced this idea (and my weaknesses… well, let’s just ignore those). Ironically by the time I got to college I was no longer being bullied anyway, so my “great idea” was worthless… but I didn’t realize that – I just knew that I felt good. I endured others and tolerated them when they did things that bothered me, but mostly ignored them. Still self-centered… still immature – just with a twist. But there was a few huge problems with this attitude (obviously). First, it’s almost impossible to develop relationships with people when you have an attitude of being better than everyone else all the time. (It’s no surprise that all of my life long friends are those from my elementary-high school years, I don’t have many from college). Second, when I swapped from taking offense to things to “enduring” and “tolerating” things… that only works for so long… because eventually you run out of patience. And then, every little thing sets you off.

Most of us share these attitudes and experiences as we go through our lives – but in small doses. When you’re driving in a car – all or most of the other drivers are “idiots” but not you! You’re the good one! When you have a group project for work or school that people need to collaborate on – Your ideas are the best, other people get lucky… sometimes. If there is a task that needs to be done frequently – Your way of doing it is the best, most efficient way… other people just don’t understand. Me – well, I leaned in to this… HARD. I wasn’t a jerk about it outwardly – I didn’t say things directly to other people… I knew that wouldn’t help anything… but I still thought these things, and it affected my behavior and attitude without me even realizing it.

This reached it’s pinnacle my first year of teaching HS math.

Talent for double meaning in email – depending on tone. On the surface – harmless. Logical progression implied….

What happened…

I did not like who I had become.

See, this is bitterness taking root. I had experienced pain. I had experienced anger. I felt that I wasn’t being treated fairly and that my life was not going the way I wanted it to. So, I did something about it. I stuffed that anger deep down inside (didn’t deal with it) – and created a new approach to dealing with other people that made me feel better but still hurt others. I thought I was solving the problem! I thought I had outsmarted my feelings! Ha! I allowed the anger in my life to control me and change the way I think and behave on a semi-permanent basis. I became a slave – and I didn’t even know it.

Proverbs 16:2 People may be pure in their own eyes, but the Lord examines their motives.

Now, we all have different stories of how bitterness takes root, and enters our lives… and the target of our bitterness is different – it could be family, it could be an event, it could even be against God… but in almost every situation bitterness looks and behaves in the same way… So, here are some signs that you might be struggling with bitterness in your own life:

1. Imaginary conversations
2. Replay a conversation or experience over and over again in your head
3. Feel the need to tell someone what he/she did
4. Easily offended by this person
5. Strong negative emotional reactions to things they say and do around you
6. Remember details of things he/she said from months or years ago
7. You are keeping a list of offenses.

Now, remember what I said before about being angry and the chemicals that are released and how it affects your body? (organs shut down, metabolism speeds up, energy produced, muscles stronger) Well, when you’re stuck in this fight or flight mode… when bitterness has taken root… when you’re angry all the time (and ignoring or not acknowledging that you are)… these chemicals are CONSTANTLY being released. You know what happens to your body over time like this?

Muscles suffer from the tension – neck and shoulder pain. Immune system starts to fail. Sick more often, or worse symptoms. Stomach starts to rebel. Acid Reflux, IBS, and ulcers. It affects fertility and reproductive organs. Your lungs and breathing. Asthma worsens. High blood pressure, blood clots, Coronary heart disease. Metabolism gets affected. Gain weight, develop diabetes. Skin is affected – psoriasis or acne worse. You DNA actually looks “older” under a microscope.

Stress, anxiety, anger… this is the #1 cause of most of the serious issues that kill us! We are killing ourselves.

So, what do we do? What did I do? The first thing I had to do was admit that I had a problem. It sounds silly, and cliché, but there’s a reason why every addiction group starts with this first step. I didn’t feel angry all the time, I didn’t act angry all the time… but I WAS. I was bitter. There were deep hurts and experiences from my past that changed my behavior and attitude – and I didn’t like it. I didn’t want to be that person anymore.

First, we need to address the fear that caused the initial hurt and give it to God and know that it can’t hurt us anymore.

Give all your worries and cares to God, for he cares about you. 1 Peter 5:7

The Lord is my light and my salvation—  
    so why should I be afraid?  
The Lord is my fortress, protecting me from danger,  
    so why should I tremble?  
**2**When evil people come to devour me,  
    when my enemies and foes attack me,  
    they will stumble and fall.  
**3**Though a mighty army surrounds me,  
    my heart will not be afraid.  
Even if I am attacked,  
    I will remain confident.

Psalm 27:1-3

We need to rest in these verses. Read them, pray them, and accept them. Not just agree with them, but live our life according to them.

For me, my initial hurt and pain came from those times in my youth. My fear was that I was not good enough and that others would not accept me. I was afraid there was something wrong with me.

There are a number of verses I could have read to reassure myself about who I am and how God loves me and accepts me – unfortunately I wasn’t a believer yet when I went through this so I had to struggle with this on my own. (Until later when I became a believer and went through this whole process again). But I promise you – there are verses that specifically deal with the fear and hurt that you have experienced. Find them and be comforted!

Next, we do, with practice, have the ability to control that fight or flight response. Not perhaps directly in the moment… but BEFORE we ever get there. First by addressing those fears, anxieties, and things that offend us so we never end up in the situation in the first place – like we just spoke about. But then, with enough practice, when we feel ourselves slipping into that “response” we can redirect our thoughts and pull ourselves back. It’s a matter of choosing to not to be offended – in advance – and preparing for when it might happen.

This all comes down to an attitude shift toward humility and empathy.

We need to forfeit our right to be offended. Make a sacrifice that is pleasing to God.

Understand this, my dear brothers and sisters: You must all be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to get angry. Human anger does not produce the righteousness God desires. So get rid of all the filth and evil in your lives, and humbly accept the word God has planted in your hearts, for it has the power to save your souls. James 1:19-21

This requires an act of humility. Forfeiting our right isn’t actually even possible though… because you never had the right in the first place. We aren’t instructed, directed or led to be offended… we are taught to forgive…

Humility allows us to remember that we are not better than others. We are NOT GOD. We have been created by Him and so has everyone else. We are ALL his masterpieces. Empathy allows us to consider other people’s points of view and experiences.

Chad, Brue, Nate – what was going on in their lives. Who they were.

The next person I meet… who are they?

The “trick” (if you want to call it that) is to not see people for how they are… see them through God’s eyes – their potential and who they were made to be. Love them. And remember that they aren’t there yet, and neither are you!

And finally, we have to battle our sense of entitlement. Our sense of entitlement to anger is directly proportional to our perception of our own relative innocence. When we remember and KNOW that we are not… it is much easier to extend grace, mercy and forgiveness.

Steps of Obedience

1. Self-Reflection – Do I have a problem? Am I bitter?
2. Pray and Ask for Help
3. Practice seeing others “through God’s eyes”