



Righteous Anger and Tender Hearts: A Gospel Dilemma?  
 A Sermon Delivered by Bill J. Leonard  
 Myers Park Baptist Church on August 12, 2018  
 Ephesians 4: 24-5:2

Primitive and Old Regular Baptist preachers, two sides of a similar Calvinist and Appalachian coin, often weep when they preach, walking around, shaking hands with members of the congregation, looking sinners right in the eye. Have I told you that before? Weeping comes because of the power of the Holy Ghost falling upon them, an experience that they find overwhelming. It may also come because their tender hearts reach out to their listeners with the story of God’s amazing grace—for the elect, of course. In his superb book, *Faith and Meaning in the Southern Uplands*, the Appalachian folklore scholar Loyal Jones, longtime Berea College professor, cites Old Regular Baptist Elder Frank Fugate’s assertion:

We need more tenderness now. We need people with more [for]bearance, more prayer and [for]bearance with other’s weakness and its forgiveness and it is respect and honor for others and not being eager to condemn others and to always take time, because everybody’s entitled to be heard.<sup>1</sup>

“We need more tenderness now.” I first heard Elder Fugate speak those words on a documentary on the Old Regular Baptists made by the Kentucky film company Appalshop in 1976. They recorded Elder Fugate sitting in a rocking chair in a corn field in Knox County, Kentucky. I’ve shown that documentary to students for at least 30 years, but this morning, in the year of our Lord 2018 we need to hear him again, perhaps more urgently than ever before. “We need more tenderness now.” So, as Elder Fugate would say, I’m going to “take the stand” and talk about gospel tenderness, compassion if you will, a quality of life that the author of the epistle to the Ephesians urged the earliest Christians to cultivate almost 2 millennia ago.

Biblical scholars differ as to whether St. Paul wrote Ephesians. Some believe he did, most, these days, aren’t so sure. Paul’s signature references aren’t evident here, his personal acknowledgements, his greetings to specific persons can’t be found. Yet the book’s emphasis is certainly Pauline, particularly a concern for what it means to live “in Christ.” It could have been written as early as 62 or as late as 80. Either way, the distance between us is more than chronological. Our culture, our religion, our daily lives are so different from the Ephesians. Can any of this apply?

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<sup>1</sup> Loyal Jones, *Faith and Meaning in the Southern Uplands*, (Carbondale: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 11.

Culture changes; less so human nature. This is timeless Christianity linking our own humanity nature, human weakness, human possibilities with first century people who could never have envisioned us and our world. At first glance, these admonitions from Ephesians may seem hackneyed and obvious, quaint or cliched. But in 2018 America, indeed globally, they are distinguishing marks of the gospel, a witness to who we are and how we are to live. These days we may take them for granted or overlook them in our panic to preserve some element of a Christianity that the Left ignores and the Right weaponizes. Yet these qualities of Christian living may well constitute something of the church's last stand, somewhere between grace and barbarism—gospel bullet points for the here and now.

- “No more lies, no more pretense.” Have you watched TV lately? Perused Face Book, Twitter or Instagram? Skimmed a newspaper (you remember newspapers)? Got any alternative facts today? There is now a cottage industry in American society keeping track of lies, told in Congress, state houses, governors' offices, the White House of course, Universities, Corporations, and yes, in Church. “No more lies”—if that one gospel admonition stuck this morning, we'd be better people, better citizens, and better off. What if every church in America posted a banner outside its doors simply saying, “No more lies.” Ephesians 4:25? Now there's a witness!
- “Go ahead and be angry.” So, God doesn't mind if we pitch the occasional fit? What a great religion! But then there's this: “Don't use your anger as fuel for revenge. Don't stay angry. Don't go to bed angry.” Not all anger is the same—hold that thought.
- “Don't steal (even “to make ends meet.”) “But once you get an honest job, don't forget to use some of those wages to help others who can't work, or can't get hired anywhere.” I love this text and this translation. Don't steal, even to make ends meet—Apologies to Jean Valjean. Get a job and use it to do something communal. Simple Christian living just got radical.
- “Watch the way you talk”—Postmodern update: Watch the way you talk, tweet, text, email, post online, gossip, malign, whine, and BTW, don't profane language or people. Profane language isn't just cussing. Language that dehumanizes profanes us all.
- Here's the bottom line: Be like Jesus, meaning be gentle with each other, tender hearted some translations say. Suddenly we're back in that corn field with Elder Fugate:
- “We need more tenderness now”.

On the unwelcomed first anniversary of last year's race riots in Charlottesville, VA and the memory of Heather Heyer, run down that day by a white supremacist, we are challenged to navigate tender heartedness and righteous anger. “Go ahead and be angry,” today's Ephesian text admonishes, but “don't use your anger as fuel for revenge.”

William Sloane Coffin, late Yale chaplain, Riverside Church pastor, was in many ways the personification of that righteous anger that rests at the heart of the gospel. He writes: “When the powerful do as they will, and the poor suffer as they must, it's easy to become bitter. In fact, it's comforting to be bitter. But it's not creative, bitterness being such a diminishing emotion. Far more productive is anger, which, if focused is spiritual nourishment for those perishing alive for want of it.”

Coffin frets that many people, particularly liberals, allow their concern for “tolerance,” to create a kind of romanticized tenderheartedness that easily turns to passivity in the face of injustice. This “deadly combination,” of tolerance and passivity allows “us to tolerate the intolerable, to ignore the power of anger in works of love; for if you lessen your anger at the structures of power you lower your love for the victims of power.”

Like the Ephesian writer, Coffin sets boundaries on even our righteous evil, noting “We have to hate evil, else we’re [simply] sentimental. But if we hate evil more than we love the good, we become good haters, and of those the world already has too many. However deep, our anger must always and only measure our love.”<sup>2</sup>

Righteous anger compelled Roger Williams to inform Massachusetts Puritans that there are no Christian nations, only Christian people, bound to Christ by faith, not citizenship—and got him exiled. Righteous anger sent Harriet Tubman 6 times into the slavery infested South to guide her black sisters and brothers to freedom; righteous anger sent Fanny Lou Hamer into Mississippi court houses (and jails) in the fight against Jim Crow voting laws; righteous anger sent Reverend Chrissy Tatum Williamson to Georgia this year as a witness for prison reform! And all the people said . . . .

I’ve had a case or two of righteous anger over the years. Once, years ago, it required me to write my first and only letter to the old “Dear Abbie” syndicated newspaper column in response to a Presbyterian minister wrote in to suggest that God “looked down” and decided which married couples were strong enough to parent children with special needs and permitted their birth into those families. I replied with a “hard copy” (take that multiple ways) expressing my strong opposition to 1) The idea that God caused disabilities; 2) the suggestion that certain couples were “predestined” to have special needs children; and 3) bad theology masquerading as tenderheartedness. Abbie sent it to the preacher who wrote back, telling me how sorry he was that my experience with our daughter had given me such a bad attitude, and encouraging me to get help for my “anger.” Right then I learned to distinguish self-righteous anger from righteous anger, and tender heartedness from condescension. Perhaps that all sounds trivial now, but it wasn’t at that moment in the life of our daughter.

Truth is, anger turned into rage is rampant in our world. Recently I’ve been overtaken by Pankaj Mishra’s, *Age of Anger: A History of the Present*, written by Pankaj Mishra, a book filled with hopeful pessimism. He asserts that western democratic, capitalistic idealism made promises to global populations that could never have been kept, disappointments that produced fear in the educated Middle Classes, rage among the dispossessed, and indifference among the plutocrats, creating an “everyday culture of cruelty and heartlessness.”

Mishra insists that in response to this “global civil war” of rage,” we need to confront a culture “that stokes unappeasable vanity and shallow narcissism.” “In order to make the future less grim,” we must learn to interpret “a world bereft of moral certitudes and metaphysical guarantees.” “Above all,” he writes, “we need to reflect more penetratingly on our complicity in everyday forms of violence and dispossession, . . . [our] callousness before t the spectacle of suffering.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> William Sloan Coffin, *The Heart is a little to the Left* (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 1999), 5-6.

<sup>3</sup> Pankaj Mishra, *Age of Anger: A History of the Present* (NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2017), 329-30.

Today, let's acknowledge that "the times are out of hand;" and the Christian church, at least in America, seems at times too divided, too weak or too panicked to respond. What to do? I think we run to Jesus as fast as we can. Jesus taught the church righteous anger in his response to racist dogmatists, manipulative moneychangers, and arrogant disciples. But he mirrored God's tender heartedness toward the disabled, the exploited, and the stranger, pointing them and us to the God who won't give up until the last lost sheep has found its way home. And lest we think that's pious sentimentalism, let's remember that Jesus' tender heartedness got him crucified.

Martin Luther King, Jr. sums it up in a 1959 sermon entitled "A Tough Mind and a Tender Heart," declaring: "There is another way which combines tough mindedness with tender heartedness. It is tough minded enough to resist evil. It is tendered hearted to resist [evil] with love. It avoids the complacency and the do-nothingism of the soft minded and the violence and bitterness of the hard hearted."<sup>4</sup>

In the 75-year history of this great church, you've cultivated such edgy righteous anger at the injustices of society and the church. Keep it coming, right now amid the injustice that surrounds us everyone.

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<sup>4</sup> (<https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/tough-mind-and-tender-heart>)