

## Anger and Sin

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The following is not a full exegetical discussion of this passage, but a summary of options and issues that draws heavily from other sources. It was originally designed as a classroom discussion guide for this text.

Eph. 4:26, ὀργίζεσθε καὶ μὴ ἁμαρτάνετε.<sup>1</sup>

“In your anger do not sin” (NIV).

“Be angry, and yet do not sin” (NASB).

Note: ὀργίζεσθε and ἁμαρτάνετε can both be either imperative or indicative *by form*.

### **The problem**

There are not many (any?) other NT texts that clearly praise human anger. If Eph. 4:26 does command anger, it is the only such instance.

### **Exegetical options (7 possible interpretations)**

1. You are angry, yet do not sin. (declarative indicative ... imperative)
2. Do not be angry and do not sin. (prohibitive imperative ... imperative; μή negates both)
3. Are you angry? Then do not sin. (interrogative indicative ... imperative)
4. If you are angry, do not sin. (conditional imperative ... imperative)
5. Although you may get angry, do not sin. (concessive imperative ... imperative)
6. Be angry (if you must), but do not sin. (permissive imperative ... imperative)
7. Be angry and do not sin. (command imperative ... imperative)

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<sup>1</sup>The classic discussion of this passage is Dan Wallace, “ΟΡΓΙΖΕΣΘΕ in Ephesians 4:26: Command or Condition?” *CTJ* 3 (1989): 353–72. (Reprinted in *The Best in Theology*, v. 4, ed. J. I. Packer [Carol Stream, IL: Christianity Today, 1990], 57–74.) The article is also summarized in *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 491–92. The discussion above follows the general outline of the original *CTJ* article.

## **Evaluation**

**Numbers 1 and 2** are grammatically possible, but implausible for the following reasons.

First, the statement occurs in the midst of a hortatory section (surrounded by 10 imperatives and 2 hortatory subjunctives).

Second, it is not normal for a *καί* to mark the shift from indicative to imperative.

Third, this statement follows the LXX of Psalm 4:4 (Heb. = 4:5) in which the translator has obviously intended *ὀργίζεσθε* to represent the Hebrew imperative *רַגִּזְוּ*.

**Number 3** is grammatically impossible.

**Numbers 4, 5, and 6** are essentially the same view (despite apparent differences in English) and constitute feasible alternatives to **number 7**.

## **Exegetical considerations**

### **1. Psalm 4:4 (5)**

Probably *not* intended as exegetical/prophetic, typological, or even analogical. Paul most likely simply uses the wording here (thus: allusion; no suggestion of fulfillment; no contextual relevance, etc.). If so, then the context, etc. of Ps. 4 is probably not relevant to our understanding of Eph. 4.

### **2. Grammar**

The possibility of understanding this as a conditional imperative (“if you are angry...”) hinges, in part, on the legitimacy of that grammatical construction.<sup>2</sup> It may be observed, first, that this *is* a legitimate use of the imperative. To give one clear example (of the 20 or so examples in the NT), note the statement in Matt. 7:7,

**Αἰτεῖτε** καὶ δοθήσεται ὑμῖν, **ζητεῖτε** καὶ εὕρήσετε, **κρούετε** καὶ ἀνοιγήσεται ὑμῖν.

(**Ask** and it will be given to you; **seek** and you will find; **knock** and the door will be opened to you.)

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<sup>2</sup>See not only Wallace’s discussion in *CTJ* 3:367–71, but also his *Greek Grammar*, 489–92.

The three verbs, ask/seek/knock, are all imperatives and are usually translated as such. But the semantic force of these three statements is: *if you ask* (and you should), then it will be given to you; *if you seek* (and you should), then you will find; *if you knock* (and you should), then it will be opened. This is what the grammarians call a conditional imperative. The imperative still carries an injunctive force (thus the *and you should* in the expanded translation), but also specifies what must be true if the second verb is to be fulfilled. Here the second verbs, given/find/open, depend for their realization on the accompanying imperative being obeyed.

But what about Eph. 4:26? Can this legitimately be considered a conditional imperative? The answer is *no*, for the following reasons. First, all other conditional imperatives in the NT occur in the syntactical pattern: *imperative + καί + future indicative*.<sup>3</sup> The pattern here is different: *imperative + καί + imperative*. If it is a conditional imperative, then it is the only one in this type of construction in the NT. Second, if we grant the classification for purposes of argument, what would the statement mean? The pattern of the other conditional imperatives is that the second verb states what would be true if the imperative is fulfilled. In this instance, the semantic force of the statement would be: *if you are angry* (and you should be), then you will not sin. But this does not seem to be what Paul has in mind; indeed, it makes far to general a statement and actually encourages anger with the assurance that sin will not be the result. We should conclude then that this is not a conditional imperative. It is a command imperative: Be angry and do not sin. But what exactly does that mean?

### **3. Contextual factors**

#### **3a. Hortatory section**

As noted above, this statement occurs in a hortatory (or: parenetic) section (8 consecutive imperatives and 2 hortatory subjunctives in vv. 26–30, and even when another indicative verb occurs, it is in a subordinate clause—as all the indicatives through at least 5:20 [I didn't check further]!). This would be a strong argument for ambiguous forms to be taken as imperatival.

#### **3b. Focus of surrounding imperatives**

Also significant is the fact that all the immediately surrounding imperatives and hortatory subjunctives focus on the Christian's relationship *with other Christians*, not with unbelievers. Note the beginning of this sequence in v. 25: “neighbor ... one body.” It is explicit again in v. 29, “building others up,” v. 32, “one another ... forgiving each other ... you,” 5:2, “us,” 5:3, “among you,” and 5:3, “God's holy people” (i.e., “saints”).

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<sup>3</sup>Or its semantic equivalent.

“However we take ὀργίζεσθε, it should be seen as anger directed within the church.” It does *not* contextually refer to unbelievers: “a righteous indignation toward unbelievers [misses] the thrust of the apostle here.”<sup>4</sup> (The significance of this perspective will be seen later.)

### 3c. Understanding of original audience

Although not determinative in itself, it is significant that neither Gentiles nor Jews would have sensed any inherent or unusual problem in a command that a human (i.e., as opposed to God) should be angry. “Righteous anger” was a commonly understood and accepted concept in both contexts.<sup>5</sup> The only two exceptions to this were the Stoics (Greek philosophic school) and Philo (a Jewish writer heavily influenced by the Stoics). Both categorically condemned anger for any reason.

### 3d. Anger prohibited in 4:31

Also to be noted is the contextual prohibition of “*all* bitterness, rage and *anger*” (same word, πᾶσα ὀργή) in 4:31. Some have used this to argue against taking 4:26 as an imperative, reasoning that if v. 31 prohibits *all* anger, then v. 26 can’t allow *some* anger. On the surface it appears that there is a real tension between the two statements. Two things might be said. First, the statement in v. 31 probably does not indicate *all* anger, but should be understood as part of a progressive list: bitterness > rage > anger. The condemnation is therefore only anger that arises from bitterness and rage.<sup>6</sup> Second, v. 26, regardless of the view taken, also distinguishes anger and sin, implying that some anger is not sin. There is thus no real contradiction at this point.

### 3e. Contextual restrictions

The second clause of v. 26 has often been viewed as a temporal limitation. Whatever v. 26a says, it applies only until sundown and must then terminate or it becomes sin. This is probably *not* what is intended. Part of the clue to this problem is that the second part of the verse uses a different word than the first part. 26a refers to anger with the verb form ὀργίζεσθε (ὀργίζω), but 26b does *not* use the equivalent noun form ὀργή. Instead it uses παροργισμός—a rare word that always has an active meaning: “the cause of provocation” or “the cause of [your] anger.” In the LXX (where it occurs 7 times, ctr. NT hapax) it refers to “the external cause by one party (usually Israel) which aroused the

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<sup>4</sup>Wallace, *CTJ* 3:360.

<sup>5</sup>See Wallace, *CTJ* 3:362 for documentation.

<sup>6</sup>Wallace, *CTJ* 3:363 n.56 cites Eadie, Westcott, and M. Barth to this effect.

wrath of another (usually Yahweh).”<sup>7</sup> Wallace summarizes the impact that this has on our understanding of the text.

Paul might well be saying, “Deal with the cause of your anger immediately.” And if that cause is another brother (as would be most natural in this section), the point might well be the same as Matt 18:15: “if your brother sins, go and rebuke him.” V 27 then would have the force of “don’t let the devil gain a foothold in the assembly by letting sin go unchecked.” Further, μὴ ἁμαρτάνετε in this view would have the force of “do not sin by doing nothing—act quickly to discipline your brother.”<sup>8</sup>

If this is the case, then the subject matter may well be church discipline instead of personal anger. We tend to read this text in individualistic terms (reflecting our American individualism). But that may well miss the point that Paul is making. Rather than becoming introspective and trying to determine if we have been angry for the right reasons or if we have sinned in some way by being angry, we ought to heed the context and seek to communicate the church’s responsibility in relation to sin by its members.

If the church fails to exercise righteous anger at sin in her midst, she is giving the devil a foothold—a base from which to encourage sin and to spread unrighteous living to others in the church. Church discipline, whether formal congregational action or informal exhortation of one believer by another, is intended to have a purifying effect on God’s people.

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<sup>7</sup>Wallace, *CTJ* 3:365.

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