

What does it mean: “Be angry, and yet do not sin”?

In making the English translation of the Bible, the Greek text of Ephesians 4:26 posed a challenge. Throughout the Bible, there aren't any verses that speak positively of the human emotion of anger. Was this verse a command to be angry? Does this passage suggest that anger is not sinful? When read within the context of Ephesians 4:27, how does “sundown” and “Satan” shed light to our understanding of what Paul was trying to tell the Ephesian church? And how does this all square with Ephesians 4:31?

Grammarians approach this issue by examining the syntax and grammar of the Greek text. This specific case is an example where a study on the *mood* of the verbs provides the basis to understand Paul.

Mood is a feature of verbs that indicates the attitude of the speaker and the likelihood of the verbal action occurring. It reflects the reality of the speaker's statement regardless if the statement is true or not: does he think the verbal action will occur or possibly occur? The Greek language has four moods: indicative, imperative, subjective and optative.

The **indicative mood** indicates an assertion where a statement is presented as something real or certain regardless of whether the speaker believes it or not. Example: God *is not mocked* (Gal 6:7).

The **imperative mood** indicates an action of intention such as a command instructing another to a certain action. Example: *Love* the Lord with all your heart, soul and mind (Matt 22:37).

The **subjective mood** indicates probability with some uncertainty of an action. It is often used with a conditional statement (if – then clauses) and under certain circumstances, it may indicate a definite outcome. Example: so that the manifold wisdom of God *might now be made known* through the church to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly places (Eph 3:10).

The **optative mood** indicates an action that is possible and is often used to communicate a wish or hope. Example: Now may the God of peace Himself *sanctify* you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body *be preserved* complete, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Thess 5:23).

When studying the verbal mood of Ephesians 4:26, scholars have debated the merits of several possible syntactical translations; however, the following four represented the best possibilities. Each interpretation is listed with their verbal mood and is simplified without any presentation of the Greek terms.

<p>1. If you are angry, [conditional imperative] This imperative imposes a demand to do what is commanded under certain conditions.</p>	<p>do not sin. [imperative]</p>
<p>2. Although you may get angry, [concessive imperative] This imperative imposes a demand to do what is commanded as one may yield or concede.</p>	<p>do not sin. [imperative]</p>
<p>3. Be angry (if you must), [permissive imperative] Rarely used to indicate permission, this usage of the imperative does not normally imply that some deed is optional or approved. It often views that act as a <i>fait accompli</i>. In such instances, the mood could almost be called "an imperative of resignation."</p>	<p>but do not sin. [imperative]</p>

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<p>4. Be angry [command imperative] The imperative is most commonly used for commands. The basic force of the imperative of command involves somewhat different nuances with each tense.</p>	and do not sin. [imperative]
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The first three interpretive options (conditional, concessive and permissive) are considered as one view, because there is little difference between them. For example, a *concession* is a type of condition, and *permissive* is very similar to the *conditional* as seen below. Despite their subtle differences of meaning in English, they all view Paul speaking of anger in a conditional sense.

1. If you are angry, (conditional imperative) do not sin. (imperative)
2. Although you may get angry, (concessive imperative) do not sin. (imperative)
3. Be angry (if you must), (permissive imperative) but do not sin. (imperative)

The fourth interpretive option takes the view that Paul is speaking of anger as a command.

4. Be angry (command imperative) and do not sin. (imperative)

How did scholars determine which translation best reflected Paul’s words and intent? The academic discussion between those favoring the conditional view versus the command view will never be completely concluded; however, the following are the main points of how most see Ephesians 4:26.

Grammatical Construction

Does Ephesians 4:26 follow the grammatical construction of a conditional imperative?

There are about 20 examples of *positively* identified conditional imperatives in the New Testament and an example can be seen in John 2:19.

“Jesus answered them, ‘**Destroy** this temple, and in three days I **will** raise it up.’”

The grammatical structure is seen with the verbs highlighted. Here the verbal mood construction is:

imperative (i.e. *destroy*) + conjunction (Greek term *kai*) + future indicative (i.e. *will*)

From this, it is observed that Ephesians 4:26 does not follow the typical conditional imperative grammatical structure, because its pattern is:

imperative (i.e. *angry*) + conjunction (Greek term *kai*) + imperative (i.e. *do*)

Throughout the New Testament, scholars have identified 4 *probable* and 21 *possible* instances where the grammatical structure could be a conditional imperative. Is it possible that Ephesians 4:26 might still be a conditional imperative?

The answer is no, because of the following reasons:

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In all 4 *probable* conditional imperatives where the structure imperative + kai + imperative exists, the second imperative functions semantically as a *future indicative*.

In all 21 *potentially* conditional imperatives where the structure imperative + kai + imperative exists, the second imperative retains its injunctive force. In other words, the second verb with an injunctive force specifies what action will occur when the action of the first verb takes place.

Luke 7:7b is an example of this:

“..., but just **say** the word, and my servant **will be** healed.”

The injunctive force is seen: if you say the word, he will be healed.

If Ephesians 4:26 was a conditional imperative, it would have carried an injunctive force (if you are angry (and you should be), then you will not sin). However, its grammatical structure carries the force of a command, and Paul seems to encourage anger with the assurance that sin will not be the result (be angry and do not sin). But what does this really mean?

Literary Context

Ephesians 4:26 is found within a section that is defined at its border by two indicatives:

“we **are** members of one another” (Eph 4:25) and “God in Christ **has** forgiven you” (Eph 4:32)

Grammarians studying the verbal moods in Ephesians 4:25-32 have counted ten imperatives and two hortatory subjunctives.

A *hortatory subjunctive* is a statement urging others to join in some action (commanding oneself and one’s associates). It will always be the first person plural form of the subjunctive mood, and this often is found near the beginning of the sentence. It is usually translated as “let us...”.

This section, Ephesians 4:25-32, speaks to the relationship of one Christian to another within the church body:

“neighbor... one body” (Eph 4:25)

“building others up” (Eph 4:29)

“one another... Forgiving each other... you” (Eph 4:29)

Paul’s exhortation of anger, which some commentators call *righteous indignation*, is directed within the church body! It is not righteous indignation directed towards non-Christians.

Theological Context

The prohibition of “all bitterness, rage and anger” found in Ephesians 4:31 creates a contradiction with verse 26. If verse 31 prohibits *all* anger, then verse 26 cannot permit *some* anger. To base an interpretation by appealing to either verse by itself is wrong: all anger is the righteous duty of a Christian is just as wrong as claiming that all anger is sinful. What is Paul saying about anger in these two verses?

In verse 31, Paul is speaking of malicious anger. There is an ascending progression to verse 31: bitterness – rage – anger. In this context, verse 31 is not prohibiting all anger but *all* anger arising from bitterness and rage.

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In verse 26, Paul makes a distinction that there is a type of anger, righteous anger, which is not sinful.

When Ephesians 4:26b is considered (Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry.), Paul seemingly sets a temporal limit to this righteous anger: be angry, but limit that anger.

However, this view of a temporal limit does not appear to be what Paul intended. Grammarians make an interesting point: the noun form for “anger” in verse 26b is different than what is expected for the verb form in verse 26a.

Verse 4:26a: *Be **angry**, and yet do not sin.*

The verb “angry” is translated from the Greek term “ōrgizō” (Strong #3710).

Verse 4:26b: *Do not let the sun go down while you are still **angry**.*

The noun form that corresponds to the verb form “ōrgizō” is “orgē” (Strong #3709); however, the Greek term “parōrgismōs” (Strong #3950) is used.

The Greek term “parōrgismōs” is a hapax legomena, which is a term occurring only once in the New Testament. This term is found only in Biblical Hebrew, and found seven times in the Greek Old Testament (Septuagint). Instead of having a passive sense of angry, “parōrgismōs” has an active meaning referring to “that which caused provocation” or in the context of Ephesians 4 “the cause of your anger.”

In this context, Paul appears to be exhorting Christians to deal with the cause of one’s anger immediately. And in the context of this section dealing with relationships between one Christian with another, Paul is encouraging Christians to deal with their “righteous indignation” immediately when the cause of their anger is another Christian.

This is theologically consistent with Matthew 18:15: “if your brother sins, go and rebuke him.”

Instead of an exhortation of personal anger, Paul is addressing the issue of church discipline. In essence, Paul appears to be saying, “do not sin by doing nothing – act quickly to discipline your brother.” The church needs to exercise its responsibility of disciplining a member who sins, whether by informal exhortation of one Christian by another or by formal action by the church body.

If the church fails to exercise righteous anger at sin within the church body, the church is giving Satan a foothold from which to encourage and spread sinful behavior and thoughts. The Apostle Paul places the moral obligation on Christians to be angry and respond quickly when the occasion of sin arises within the church.

References:

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